

MENTORING TOGETHER:
TRAINING FOR MARRIAGE MENTORING IN A GROUP COHORT

A THESIS-PROJECT
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To Nikki and the boys. You always believed I would finish.

Thank you.

CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
ABSTRACT.....	vii
CHAPTER 1: The Problem in its Setting	1
CHAPTER 2: Biblical and Theological Foundations	19
CHAPTER 3: Literature Review	34
CHAPTER 4: Project Design and Implementation	59
CHAPTER 5: Outcomes and Conclusion	73
APPENDIX A: Training Schedule.....	83
APPENDIX B: Questionnaires	85
APPENDIX C: Interview Questions.....	89
APPENDIX D: Transcripts	90
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	113
VITA	118

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Averages of Responses to Pre-Training and Post-Training Questionnaires.....70

Table 2: Change in responses by Number of Individuals71

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ABSTRACT

Studies on marriage mentoring have primarily focused on the benefits of mentoring or the value of mentoring in marriage education programs. Mentors are a helpful addition to a marriage program; however, potential mentors may require training to increase their confidence and their comfort with the level of transparency and openness mentoring requires. This project explores the value of training mentor couples in a group cohort, hypothesizing that the group setting will have a positive impact on potential mentor couples. The results demonstrate that group training may lead to higher levels of confidence for mentoring and comfort with transparency and openness.

CHAPTER 1: The Problem in its Setting

RATIONALE FOR THE PROJECT

Many churches maintain a marriage ministry program, either to help couples build skills to prepare for marriage (usually called “premarriage,” “premarital education” or “marriage prep”) or to help married couples strengthen their relationship (often referred to as “marriage enrichment”). These ministries can include retreats, seminars or workshops, classes led by a pastor, counselor, or other educator, or support groups of various kinds. Over the years, as a counselor and family minister this researcher has studied and implemented many of these ministries. But the programs he considers most helpful (for reasons which will be explained in this thesis-project) involve some form of “marriage mentoring,” pairing spiritually mature and experienced couples with less experienced couples to share wisdom, encouragement, and guidance.

However, recruiting and training these marriage mentors can be quite a challenge. Effective mentor couples must be biblically sound in their approach to marriage, as they must grapple with difficult questions that require a sound, biblical approach. They must also be confident in their ability to mentor, since the couple they mentor needs to believe they are a source of wisdom to be trusted. Finally, and perhaps most challenging of all, they must be comfortable with transparency and vulnerability, as mentoring requires a level of personal sharing beyond that of normal adult relationships.

The purpose of this thesis-project, therefore, will be to develop a program to train marriage mentor couples to be competent in the biblical understanding of marriage, confident in their ability to mentor, and comfortable with the necessary transparency and authenticity. But first, a closer look at the need for marriage ministry and experienced mentors.

The Need for Marriage Ministry

While many churches provide marriage ministry programs, there are likewise many which do not. Others offer only whatever teaching the pastor can provide through the pulpit, Bible class, or occasional counseling. Sometimes, the lack of programming is due to time constraints; a solo pastor may find it difficult to build such a ministry, no matter how valuable. Sometimes, it may be a lack of experience or expertise. In still other cases, the leadership may not see the need for it. Some might even say that marriage has always been a challenge, so the Church's response is to continue to do what it has always done: preach and teach the Word and let it do its work.

But the Church has always attempted to respond to the issues of its day, both in its theology and the ministries it develops; and one of the great challenges—and opportunities—of our day is the decline in healthy, enduring marriages, both in the church and outside of it. In fact, marriage ministry may be one of the most strategic ministries of the Church in this time.

Challenges for Marriage in Society and Church

The Challenge of Divorce

From the mid-1960s until 2000, the divorce rate in America steadily increased, peaking at around four divorces per 1,000 people. From 2000 to 2021, however, the rate dropped to 2.5 per 1,000. This downward trend, however, tracks closely with the number of marriages per person, which went from 8.2 to 6 per 1,000 people during the same period.¹ In other words, the ratio of divorces to marriages varied only slightly between 2000 and 2021, between 3.5 and 4 divorces for every ten marriages, with no lasting trend toward more marital stability. The marriage rate

1. Christy Bieber JD, "Revealing Divorce Statistics In 2023," *Forbes Advisor*, July 17, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/legal/divorce/divorce-statistics>.

decreased, not the divorce rate. Overall, in 2021 the United States reported more than 700,000 divorces or annulments.²

According to the Barna Institute, the divorce rate among Christians is now largely indistinguishable from non-Christians in the United States. Catholics and Evangelicals fare slightly better than the average, but only by a few percentage points.³ Furthermore, as Lifeway Research reports, it is often difficult to predict divorce ahead of time among churchgoing Christians; regular attenders divorce at similar rates to those who are straying, and both groups rarely seek out help prior to deciding to divorce.⁴ Opinions about divorce among Christians seem to be shifting, with an increasing number of churchgoers viewing divorce as acceptable for reasons other than “biblical grounds.”⁵ Among Protestants, 60% feel divorce is acceptable if the couple has “fallen out of love,” and 40% of pastors in the same group agree.⁶

2. “Provisional Number of Marriages and Marriage Rate: United States, 2000-2021,” Center for Disease Control, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/marriage-divorce.htm>. The CDC figures for 2021 report 689,308, but exclude information from California, Indiana, Hawaii, Minnesota and New Mexico, noting only that the data is unavailable. Assuming that the number for these states exceeds 0 by an amount proportional to other states (and based on previous years’ data this is a fair assumption), it is likely the total number for the nation far exceeds 700,000.

3. Barna Group, “New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released - Barna Group,” June 27, 2023, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released/>.

4. Lisa Green, “Threat of Divorce Hard to Spot among Churchgoing Couples,” Lifeway Research, August 3, 2021, <https://research.lifeway.com/2015/10/29/threat-of-divorce-hard-to-spot-among-churchgoing-couples/>.

5. Scripture offers two conditions in which a person seeking divorce is not guilty of sin: (1) when the other has been sexually unfaithful, and (2) when the other has behaved as an unbeliever and left the marriage. Pastors struggle at times with how those categories apply in cases such as abuse, addiction, incarceration, mental health issues, but one cannot make the case that “falling out of love,” “irreconcilable differences,” or “lack of chemistry” apply underneath the biblical categories.

6. Aaron Earls, “Views on Divorce Divide Americans,” *Lifeway Research*, December 22, 2020, <https://research.lifeway.com/2015/08/12/views-on-divorce-divide-americans/>.

But divorce has adverse outcomes—for both adults and children. Divorced adults tend to be at higher risk for anxiety and depression, and alcohol abuse.⁷ Men are at a greater risk than women and, according to one study, have a 23% higher mortality rate than their married counterparts.⁸ Children are also at greater risk for disruption; they are more likely to struggle in school, exhibit disruptive or risky behaviors, act out sexually, and struggle in their future relationships and marriages.⁹ While many children are resilient enough to withstand the divorce of their parents without any severe psychological effects, they still report higher levels of anxiety, depression, and difficulty forming secure attachments in adult life.¹⁰

Noteworthy as these mental, emotional, and social disruptions are, divorce also brings spiritual disruptions. As mentioned above, it is sometimes tricky to spot marital disruption before divorce happens, since Christians who divorce often attend services regularly and are involved in service activities prior to separation.¹¹ However, 20% of Christians will, after divorcing from their spouse, stop attending church altogether, and among those who continue, nearly half will leave the congregation they formerly attended. 35% of the children of divorced parents will stop going to church. A third of divorced Christians report decreasing their giving and service after

7. Marcus Richards, Rebecca Hardy, and M Wadsworth, “The Effects of Divorce and Separation on Mental Health in a National UK Birth Cohort,” *Psychological Medicine* 27, no. 5 (September 1, 1997): 1121–28, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s003329179700559x>.

8. David A. Sbarra, “Divorce and Health,” *Psychosomatic Medicine* 77, no. 3 (April 1, 2015): 227–36, <https://doi.org/10.1097/psy.0000000000000168>.

9. Dohoon Lee and Sara McLanahan, “Family Structure Transitions and Child Development,” *American Sociological Review* 80, no. 4 (June 30, 2015): 738–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122415592129>.

10. Lisa Laumann-Billings and Robert E. Emery, “Distress among Young Adults from Divorced Families,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 14, no. 4 (January 1, 2000): 671–87, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.14.4.671>.

11. Green, “Threat of Divorce Hard to Spot among Churchgoing Couples,” August 3, 2021.

divorcing. Often the divorce has a ripple effect, impacting social structures in the congregation, small groups, or Bible study classes.

In Malachi 2, God says that he hates divorce, and that a man who divorces his wife does violence to her. In 2021, there were more than 700,000 divorces in the United States. If the heart of God grieves for these 700,000 suffering families, the Church must also.

Cohabitation

The possibility of divorce leads many Americans to approach marriage cautiously, choosing to live together (“cohabit”) before marrying. In fact, many believe cohabitation is a good compatibility test which will increase the likelihood of a successful marriage.¹² A 2019 Pew report, for example, indicates that “the vast majority of Americans believe that it is acceptable for the unmarried to live together. Most Americans (69%) say it is acceptable even if the couple does not plan to get married.”¹³ The number of cohabiting adults in 2021 was more than double that of 1990.¹⁴ As of 2017, the number of adults aged 18-44 who have cohabited is greater than the number who have married.¹⁵ The belief that cohabitation is a good test for marriage is common among both Christians as well as non-churchgoers. According to Barna, 41% of practicing Christians believe cohabitation is a good idea. While younger generations rate

12. “Majority of Americans Now Believe in Cohabitation,” Barna Group, June 24, 2016, <https://www.barna.com/research/majority-of-americans-now-believe-in-cohabitation/>.

13. Travis Mitchell, “Public Views of Marriage and Cohabitation | Pew Research Center,” Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project, July 10, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/11/06/public-views-of-marriage-and-cohabitation/>.

14. Travis Mitchell, “Rising Share of U.S. Adults Are Living without a Spouse or Partner | Pew Research Center,” Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project, March 11, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/10/05/rising-share-of-u-s-adults-are-living-without-a-spouse-or-partner/>.

15. Pew Research Center, “Key Findings on Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S. | Pew Research Center,” May 30, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/11/06/key-findings-on-marriage-and-cohabitation-in-the-u-s/>.

highest in agreement that it is a good idea, nearly half (44%) of older generations who have children said they would want their child to cohabit before getting married.

A 2017 World Family Map report from W. Bradley Wilcox and his partners at the National Marriage Institute found that while Christians and non-Christians alike believe cohabitation is a good idea, the outcomes indicate the opposite. Across cultures, cohabiting couples do not have the same long-term stability as those who wait until marriage to begin living together.¹⁶ Studies on cohabitation have repeatedly observed that living together before marriage correlates with increased risk for marital difficulties and divorce. A 1992 study, using data from the 1987 National Survey of Families and Households, reported that couples who cohabited before marriage “are estimated to have a hazard of dissolution that is about 46% higher than for noncohabiters.”¹⁷ Zheng Wu’s study of cohabitation in Canada, conducted in the year 2000, indicates that cohabitation may as much as double the risk of future divorce.¹⁸ The 2002 report from the National Marriage Project, “Should We Live Together?” states that “virtually all research on the topic has determined that the chances of divorce ending a marriage preceded by cohabitation are significantly greater than for a marriage not preceded by cohabitation.”¹⁹

16. Laurie DeRose, W. Bradford Wilcox, and Institute for Family Studies, “The Cohabitation Go-Round: Cohabitation and Family Instability across the Globe,” <https://ifstudies.org/> (New York, NY, United States of America: Social Trends Institute, 2017), <https://www.docdroid.net/AGAE38C/the-cohabitation-go-round-cohabitation-and-family-instability-across-the-globe-pdf>.

17. Alfred DeMaris and Rao Kv, “Premarital Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital Stability in the United States: A Reassessment,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 54, no. 1 (February 1, 1992): 178, <https://doi.org/10.2307/353285>.

18. Zheng Wu, *Cohabitation: An Alternative Form of Family Living* (Don Mills, Ont. : Oxford University Press, 2000).

19. David Popenoe and Barbara Defoe Whitehead, “Should We Live Together? | National Marriage Project,” *National Marriage Project* (Piscataway, NJ, United States of America: The National Marriage Project, 2002), <https://nationalmarriageproject.org/blog/resources/should-we-live-together/>.

Some studies have demonstrated that the risk of divorce is only significant if the couple is not engaged prior to cohabiting; couples who have committed to marriage and move in during their engagement fare nearly as well as couples who move in after marriage.²⁰ Mark Regnerus, professor of sociology at the University of Texas in Austin, recognizes this in his book *The Future of Christian Marriage*. He modifies it by noting that they “only exhibit a modest elevated risk of subsequent divorce.”²¹ Still, the increased risk for couples who move in during engagement is not zero.

Cohabiting couples report lower commitment to and confidence in their relationship,²² as well as lower levels of happiness and sexual satisfaction than their married counterparts.²³ Women in cohabiting relationships are also more likely to suffer physical and emotional abuse than married women.²⁴ According to a study by the marriage and family ministry group Communio, churchgoing couples who cohabit are more likely to report feeling lonely and to disassociate from their religious community than churchgoing couples who are married.²⁵

20. Galena K. Rhoades, Scott D Stanley, and Howard J. Markman, “The Pre-Engagement Cohabitation Effect: A Replication and Extension of Previous Findings,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 23, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 107–11, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014358>; Arielle Kuperberg, “Age at Coresidence, Premarital Cohabitation, and Marriage Dissolution: 1985-2009,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 76, no. 2 (March 4, 2014): 352–69, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12092>; to name two examples.

21. Mark Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 141.

22. Galena H. Kline et al., “Timing Is Everything: Pre-Engagement Cohabitation and Increased Risk for Poor Marital Outcomes,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 18, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 311–18, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.18.2.311>.

23. Popenoe and Defoe Whitehead, “Should We Live Together? | National Marriage Project.”

24. Popenoe and Defoe Whitehead, “Should We Live Together? | National Marriage Project.”

25. JP DeGance, “Nationwide Study on Faith & Relationships,” *Communio* (Jacksonville, FL, United States of America: Communio, 2023), <https://communio.org/study/>.

Scott Stanley, co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver, theorizes that cohabitation leads couples to marry when they otherwise would not or should not. When couples begin having sex or living together, they form “premature entanglements,” where their attachments are based less on thoughtful evaluation of the relationship and more on emotional, sexual, and social connections. Therefore, separating feels more complicated than marrying, even if they are not an ideal match or not fully committed. It becomes marriage by default rather than by commitment, leading to marriages that are more likely to struggle and ultimately fail.²⁶

On the other hand, couples who cohabit and do not get married expose themselves to a greater risk of future relationship difficulties. As Jay Teachman has observed, individuals who have had multiple sexual partners prior to marriage, and especially women, are at significantly higher risk of disruption and dissolution of future intimate relationships.²⁷

Besides the potential negative impact of cohabitation on marital success, Christians must consider the spiritual implications of this act. Hebrews 13:4 urges Christians to keep sexual intimacy within the bonds of marriage, while Ephesians 5:3 insists that there should “not even be a hint of sexual immorality” among God’s people. These directions flow out of God’s initial design for marriage as given in Genesis 2:24, where a man leaves his parent’s home to be united to and become one flesh with his wife, not his girlfriend. Despite these biblical directions, however, a growing number of American Christians still find cohabitation acceptable.

26. Scott D Stanley, Galena K. Rhoades, and Howard J. Markman, “Sliding versus Deciding: Inertia and the Premarital Cohabitation Effect*,” *Family Relations* 55, no. 4 (September 7, 2006): 499–509, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2006.00418.x>.

27. Jay Teachman, “Premarital Sex, Premarital Cohabitation, and the Risk of Subsequent Marital Dissolution among Women,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65, no. 2 (May 1, 2003): 444–55, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2003.00444.x>.

Delayed and Deferred Marriage

Many Americans are simply waiting longer to get married. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2022 the median age for a first marriage was 30.1 for men and 28.2 for women. In 1947, it was 23.7 and 20.5, respectively.²⁸ While this number stayed stable through the 1950-70s, in 1980 the age began to trend upward steadily.

Regnerus reports that this trend of later and later marriage is observed across the globe. There are few countries where the age of first marriage has not increased over the last few decades.²⁹ In his research to understand why this is, he identified three areas of concern: (1) a changing view of marriage from a “foundation” to a “capstone” – that is, that couples once married to build a life together, but now marry after building a life separately; (2) the availability of “cheap sex” through dating apps, porn, and hook-up culture; and (3) uncertainty among young couples about how to be successful in marriage. Furthermore, Regnerus observes similar adverse outcomes for adults delaying marriage as those remaining unmarried. Research from the National Marriage Project shows that those who marry young report higher relationship satisfaction and equal levels of confidence in their marriage as those who delay marriage.³⁰ This contradicts today’s conventional wisdom, which encourages young people to put off marriage. Delaying marriage also increases the likelihood of premarital sexual activity;³¹ in addition to the

28. US Census Bureau, “Census Bureau Releases New Estimates on America’s Families and Living Arrangements,” Census.gov, November 17, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/americas-families-and-living-arrangements.html>.

29. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 12.

30. Alan J. Hawkins et al., “Capstones vs. Cornerstones: Is Marrying Later Always Better?: State of Our Unions 2022,” *National Marriage Project* (National Marriage Project, 2022), <https://nationalmarriageproject.org/>.

31. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 92-93.

impact this has on their faith, premarital sex is risky for future marriage, as the more sexual partners a person has before marriage, the greater the risk of divorce.³²

As well as delaying marriage, an increasing number of American adults are remaining unmarried. According to Pew Research, the number of unmarried and unpartnered American adults aged 25-54 increased from 29% in 1990 to 38% in 2019. “Unpartnered adults generally have different – often worse – outcomes than those who are married or cohabiting,” the report states, noting lower earnings, higher unemployment, lower education, and poorer health for unmarried adults compared to married adults.³³ DeGance reports in the *Communio* study that unmarried churchgoers are significantly more lonely than married churchgoers.³⁴ Loneliness is not simply the sense of not having friends; loneliness is a state of mind with “a profound sense of being alone and isolated,”³⁵ and is associated with significant mental and social health concerns.

Whether delaying marriage or remaining unmarried, these decisions reveal a cultural shift. Marriage holds less importance as a milestone for maturation than it once did. Fewer than

32. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 103.

33. Mitchell, “Rising Share of U.S. Adults Are Living without a Spouse or Partner | Pew Research Center.”

34. DeGance, “Nationwide Study on Faith & Relationships,” 13.

35. Sarvada Chandra Tiwari, “Loneliness: A Disease?,” *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 55, no. 4 (January 1, 2013): 320, <https://doi.org/10.4103/0019-5545.120536>.

half of Americans say that marriage is essential to a fulfilling life.³⁶ In 1980, only 6% of 40-year-olds in America had never been married; today it is over 25%.³⁷

The ability to remain single and celibate is a special gift given only to some, according to Jesus in Matthew 19:9-12. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul urges people to get married to defend against sexual immorality. If more Americans were receiving the special gift of celibate singlehood than a generation ago, the Church would not need to be concerned. However, the consistency of divorce, the rise of cohabitation, not to mention shifting attitudes toward things like same-sex relationships, polyamory, and pornography³⁸ reveal that there is indeed a sea change in the challenges the Church faces relating to marriage.

Jesus called the Church the salt and light of the world.³⁹ One of its functions, therefore, is to influence the culture toward godliness. But the opposite appears to have happened regarding marriage; Christians have been influenced toward worldliness. Therefore, churches must develop marriage ministry programs to support marriages inside the Church and be a light to those

36. Pew Research Center, “54% in US Say Marriage Is Important to a Fulfilling Life, Not Essential | Pew Research Center,” August 18, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/02/14/more-than-half-of-americans-say-marriage-is-important-but-not-essential-to-leading-a-fulfilling-life/>.

37. Pew Research Center, “Share of 40-Year-Olds in US Who Have Never Married Reaches New High | Pew Research Center,” June 28, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/28/a-record-high-share-of-40-year-olds-in-the-us-have-never-been-married/>.

38. In this study we will not be taking a close look at same-sex relationships or other arrangements. However, we note that an increasing number of Americans, including Christians, believe same-sex relationships and sexuality are acceptable. See: Bob Smietana, “American Views of Gay Marriage Are Divided by Faith and Friendship,” *Lifeway Research*, December 22, 2020, <https://research.lifeway.com/2015/04/16/american-views-of-gay-marriage/> and Marissa Sullivan, “Pastors Have Clarity on Same-Sex Marriage, Not the Role of LGBTQ+ People in Churches,” *Lifeway Research*, July 12, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/06/23/pastors-have-clarity-on-same-sex-marriage-not-the-role-of-lgbtq-people-in-churches/>.

39. Matthew 5:13-16, *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible references will be from the *English Standard Version*.

around it. Without support for marriage from churches, individuals and couples are vulnerable to cultural pressures toward delayed marriage, premarital sex, cohabitation, and divorce.

The Opportunity of Marriage Ministry

Marriage ministry programs are also an opportunity for the Church. They do more than minimize risk; marriage ministry can improve a congregation's health. Congregations with strong marriages are more likely to retain children into adulthood. JP DeGance, founder and president of Communio and author of their most recent study, writes, "To evangelize fruitfully in the twenty-first century, we must reverse the declining number of marriages, improve marital health, and increase the effectiveness of fathers in those marriages. By addressing these three issues, we can spark a sustained revival in Christian faith and active church attendance."⁴⁰

More than half of adults in the U.S. aged 18-30 grew up without continuously married parents throughout childhood, yet among Christians, more than 80% of the same age group had continuously married parents.⁴¹ DeGance observes that while many studies show a close link between divorce, fatherlessness and religious attrition, his study and others show that the opposite is true as well: solid marriages and present fathers lead to religious commitment. Thus, he concludes, "churches must immediately adopt new strategies and approaches to restore marriage and improve fatherhood... Relationships skills ministry should become ubiquitous in the church."⁴²

Active church attendance and commitment to the local congregation are, or at least should be, core objectives for church leaders; and marriage ministry is one worthwhile strategy

40. DeGance, "Nationwide Study on Faith & Relationships," 3.

41. DeGance, "Nationwide Study on Faith & Relationships," 2.

42. DeGance, "Nationwide Study on Faith & Relationships," 15.

for meeting those objectives. Marriage ministry also carries the benefit of creating places for Christians to connect, providing another opportunity to build community apart from regular worship gatherings, Bible studies, and small groups. A strong marriage ministry might not help the unmarried meet a spouse, but it will give them encouragement that their marriage will be supported when they find one. It may also give cohabiting couples the confidence that if they commit to marriage they will be supported.

Marriage ministry programs also provide an opportunity to reach those outside the Church. While Pew reports that many Americans today do not view marriage as essential to a fulfilling life, most still believe it is significant. In a 2019 survey, 20% of responders said marriage or a committed relationship is essential to a fulfilling life, while nearly 60% said it is important for such a life.⁴³ That represents a large number of people who might be interested in programs designed to help their marriages succeed. And many couples in America seek help with marriage. According to a 2017 study, nearly 50% of married couples in the United States have sought marriage counseling, usually within the first few years of marriage. Of those that have not, more than half would be open to some form of marriage help.⁴⁴ When churches provide marriage ministry, they open the door to meet a felt need of couples outside the church. They accomplish their purpose of being salt and light in the world, strengthening marriage in society as a whole, and gathering an audience for the gospel.

43. Pew Research Center, “54% in US Say Marriage Is Important to a Fulfilling Life, Not Essential | Pew Research Center.”

44. MidAmerica Nazarene University, “The State of Marriage Counseling,” MidAmerica Nazarene University, November 3, 2017.

A Structure for Marriage Ministry

Marriage ministry is both a need and an opportunity for churches. As mentioned above, marriage ministry programs can take many forms. Often, they are little more than what the pastor can provide in the limited time he has available: a Bible class, some counseling, or a sermon series. But a more structured program or process is better, as this provides consistency and allows for deeper study and application.

David Olson, pioneer of the well-known marriage program PREPARE-ENRICH, has demonstrated that the use of a couple inventory in connection with lessons and activities on relationship skills improved couple satisfaction and confidence, as well as increased predicted marriage success.⁴⁵ Use of PREPARE-ENRICH for marriage enrichment also yields success, improving couple scores in communication, conflict resolution, and other relationship skills, as well as increasing overall marital satisfaction and happiness.⁴⁶ Other research has likewise shown the effectiveness of premarriage programs.⁴⁷

But what about the use of mentors? Well, a study in 2004 found that the use of mentors in connection with PREPARE-ENRICH was more effective than teaching the curriculum alone.

45. Ted Futris et al., “The Impact of PREPARE on Engaged Couples: Variations by Delivery Format,” *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 10, no. 1 (January 24, 2011): 69–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332691.2011.539175>.

46. Rex Johnson, “Effectiveness of PREPARE-ENRICH Group Program for Married Couples,” *Prepare-Enrich* (Prepare-Enrich, 2015), https://prepareenrich.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/group_effectiveness_johnson.pdf; David L. Olson, Peter B. Larson, and Amy Olson-Sigg, “Couple Checkup: Tuning Up Relationships,” *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 8, no. 2 (May 29, 2009): 129–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332690902813810>.

47. Jason S. Carroll and William J. Doherty, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs: A Meta-Analytic Review of Outcome Research,” *Family Relations* 52, no. 2 (April 1, 2003): 105–18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2003.00105.x>; Scott D Stanley et al., “Premarital Education, Marital Quality, and Marital Stability: Findings from a Large, Random Household Survey,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 20, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 117–26, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.20.1.117>.

Premarital couples built skills needed for early marriage and expressed greater confidence that they had built relationships with mature couples they could turn to in time of need. The presence of the mentors was both instructive and supportive.⁴⁸ A second study published in 2011 used marriage mentor couples to offer the PREPARE-ENRICH course directly (couple-to-couple) to 1,070 low-income couples over four years. According to the research report, “the Program had a very significant impact in improving the couples’ relationships.”⁴⁹ Couples in the “Devitalized (most unhappy)” and “Conflicted (second lowest)” categories decreased significantly, and couples in the two highest categories increased significantly.

Experience and study have convinced this researcher that marriage mentors used in connection with structured premarriage and marriage enrichment programs is one of the most effective methods for ministering to couples. In this researcher’s seventeen years of marriage ministry, he has observed that the strongest couples have both a dedication to growing their relationship and a network of friendship and support at their church. Having led premarriage seminars, guided couples through premarriage counseling, and personally mentored younger couples through premarriage and early marriage, this researcher has observed that mentored couples are most likely to look for continuing advice and encouragement and are most able to withstand the usual difficulties of married life.

Recruitment of marriage mentor couples, however, is a challenge. Many couples hesitate to be marriage mentors. This researcher once invited twenty-three couples to attend an informational meeting about the training and process of mentoring. The couples were spiritually

48. Steven A. Wages and Carol Anderson Darling, “Evaluation of Marriage Preparation Program Using Mentor Couples,” *Marriage & Family* 7, no. 2 (2004): 103–21.

49. LifeInnovations, “PREPARE/ENRICH Program Has Significant Impact Using Marriage Mentors with Couples,” Online, Data set, *Prepare Enrich* (Prepare Enrich, 2011).

strong, married for more than ten years, and recommended by the pastoral staff. But not one of the couples were willing to participate after the meeting. Most cited discomfort with the transparency and vulnerability needed to mentor another couple. Other attempts have met with similar objections.

This challenge is not uncommon. An informal poll of pastors in the WELS⁵⁰ found that no respondent has a formal program for training or using marriage mentors.⁵¹ Two indicated that they have informal marriage mentoring arrangements but, in their comments, admitted that these situations developed organically apart from their leadership. Nearly half of the respondents indicated no interest in the idea, and three commented that they would not trust lay couples to be mentors. Personal conversations with other pastors and church leaders have elicited similar responses.

Training is the key to both the hesitations of the couples and the pastors who would work with them. Training systems for mentor couples are available, including videos and workbooks and sometimes online training. But those systems work best for couples already motivated to serve as mentors, not necessarily those who are hesitant or unmotivated. They also do not provide a built-in opportunity for pastors to become comfortable that the couple is qualified. So, more is needed to meet the training need.

The hypothesis of this thesis-project is that group training would more effectively meet the need. Couples training as a group could share their hesitations and confront them together.

50. "WELS" is the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, a biblically conservative Confessional Lutheran church body of which this researcher is a part. It consists of about 1,400 churches and approximately 350,000 souls. The WELS has a strong hierarchical structure and runs its own ministry training schools.

51. The poll was posted in two private Facebook groups for WELS pastors, asking them if they use marriage mentors and what their thoughts are on the positives and negatives. 24 pastors responded.

They could practice vulnerability and transparency in a less threatening setting, where they are not expected to be experts, and find affirmation in their shared struggles. They could encourage each other in their strengths as couples and their abilities to pass on their experience. A group cohort would also allow them to discuss marriage matters from a biblical perspective, correcting any unbiblical attitudes or ideas among the group. This setting, if led by a trusted church leader, would also allow pastors and leaders to assess the qualifications of any individual couple in a non-threatening way.

Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott designed a marriage mentor training program called “The Marriage Mentoring Academy.”⁵² This program involves a series of videos and a journal workbook that couples can complete at home. The Marriage Mentoring Academy website also advertises that churches can run the training as a group. Les Parrott indicated in a personal email that 250,000 couples have completed the training in its 20 years of existence. While he could not say how many marriage mentor couples are active, the feedback received from many has consistently shown that the program is effective. They have no data, however, on how many completed it in a group cohort or how effective group training of mentors might be.

This leads to the research question which will be explored in this study. Having established that churches would do well to invest in a structured marriage ministry using mentor couples, and recognizing that recruitment is challenging because couples and church leaders are hesitant, this thesis-project proposes a training process to overcome those hesitations and develop those mentors. This researcher hypothesizes that a group cohort approach to training may be an effective means to accomplish the three-fold goal of developing biblical competency, mentor confidence, and comfort with vulnerability. Therefore, the thesis-project will attempt to

52. “Marriage Mentoring - Connecting Couples to Build Better Marriages,” Marriage Mentoring, June 17, 2020, <https://www.marriagementoring.com/>.

use the Marriage Mentor Academy training in a group setting, asking, “What impact does the Marriage Mentor Academy training program have on couple confidence, comfort with vulnerability, and a biblical understanding of marriage when presented in a group?”

This question will be answered with a thesis-project carried out at St. Mark Lutheran Church. St. Mark is a member church of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). It is a church with two campuses in the Green Bay, WI area, with approximately 2,200 members. This researcher serves as the Family Minister and works to strengthen Christian households by fostering strong marriages and wise parenting, and also teaches theology and trains leaders.

This thesis-project will gather a group of potential marriage mentor couples, identified by the pastoral staff of St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, and work through the Marriage Mentor Academy program as a group. The couples will complete a questionnaire before and after the training which will assess their biblical understanding of marriage, their confidence in their ability, and their comfort with transparency and vulnerability. By comparing the answers before and after the small group training, the thesis-project will assess if the training brings about any change in these three areas. Couples will also be invited to provide their insights through brief interviews after the conclusion of the training.

Chapter 2 of this thesis-project will make a biblical case for marriage mentors as part of a church’s ministry structure. Chapter 3 will examine the background literature on marriage preparation and mentored marriage ministry. Chapter 4 will explain the thesis-project methodology and report the results of the experiment. Chapter 5 will discuss conclusions and propose future steps.

CHAPTER 2: Biblical and Theological Foundations

When Odysseus went to fight in the Trojan War, he asked his old friend Mentor to look after his son, Telemachus. The goddess Athena disguised herself as Mentor and advised Telemachus to stand up to his mother's suitors and search for his father. This part of the story touches on something familiar to human experience: an older friend passing on wisdom and guidance to a younger person. The experience is so familiar that the name Mentor has passed into our cultural consciousness as a term describing this relationship.

Most people can identify someone they have known - a teacher, coach, relative, or family friend - as a mentor. However, mentoring as an intentional process has increased in popularity in our culture over the past few decades. It appears in corporate leadership, at-risk youth advocacy groups, educational programs, and churches. In December 2021, President Joe Biden declared January "National Mentoring Month" to celebrate and encourage adults to build up younger generations.¹

Marriage Mentoring has likewise had a recent upsurge in popularity. A 2004 study using PREPARE/ENRICH² with mentor couples "supported the basic assumption that premarital couples can profit from observing and interacting with couples who are models of satisfying marriages." It indicated that the "effectiveness of mentoring as a preventive intervention in marriage preparation strongly implies the potential benefits of 'couples helping couples' in other

1. "A Proclamation on National Mentoring Month, 2022," The White House, The United States Government, December 30, 2021. Last modified December 30, 2021. Accessed January 14, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/12/30/a-proclamation-on-national-mentoring-month-2022/>.

2. PREPARE/ENRICH is a couple assessment tool and feedback system used by counselors, pastors, and social workers to provide marriage preparation and guidance, formed by Dr. David Olsen, <http://www.prepare-enrich.com>.

arenas of marriage and family enrichment."³ In 2011, LifeInnovations, the company that owns PREPARE/ENRICH, published results of a study demonstrating that marriage mentor couples who are not professional counselors can still have a significant positive impact on the marriage health of couples they mentor.⁴

Popularity and researched outcomes alone do not justify using marriage mentors for ministry. The Church must base its practices first and foremost on Scripture. However, it is worth considering if a tool is grounded in Scripture and research-based.

The paradigm in most churches is pastor-centered. The pastor teaches about marriage. The pastor prepares new couples for marriage. The pastor provides guidance and care for struggling couples and assesses if couples seeking a divorce have biblical grounds. Marriage mentoring shifts that paradigm, and this chapter will address whether this is a biblically appropriate shift. It will first look at the place of marriage in the narrative of Scripture to understand how Scripture directs us to support and uplift marriages. Second, it will examine themes of Scripture that support the use of mentor couples for marriage ministry.

The Place of Marriage in the Narrative of Scripture

Scripture begins and ends the story of humanity with a wedding. God creates the world and all its creatures, culminating with humankind made in his image to reflect his nature and reign with him over creation. Then God commands his image bearers, "Be fruitful and multiply

3. Wages, Steven A., & Darling, Carol A. "Evaluation of a Marriage Preparation Program Using Mentor Couples," *Marriage & Family* 7, 2 (2004): 116, <https://132h243xsp5946a1f2c18k9z-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Wages-Mentor-Couples-using-PE-2004.pdf>.

4. LifeInnovations. "PREPARE/ENRICH Program Has Significant Impact Using Marriage Mentors with Couples," 2011, https://132h243xsp5946a1f2c18k9z-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/pe_program_successful.pdf.

and fill the earth and subdue it."⁵ Essential to this role is the ability to reproduce, with marriage and sex as part of the design. In Genesis 2, where the Scriptural narrative zooms in on the creation of man and woman, God highlights the human need for relationship immediately after creating Adam. "It is not good that the man should be alone,"⁶ he says, and then creates a woman to meet the man's need for companionship and partnership. After bringing them together, the Scriptural author declares that this union sets the pattern for all future unions between husband and wife. "Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."⁷ The author puts a final note on the creation story with a comment on the nature of this first marriage bond, indicating that they have perfect transparency, intimacy, and respect for one another in their pre-fall state. "The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."⁸

Though sin has corrupted human relationships and ruined marriage's perfect intimacy and transparency, the purpose established in the creation account is still God's ideal for marriage. When the incarnate Jesus Christ was challenged about divorce and remarriage, he returned to Genesis and repeated the narrator's words in Genesis 2:24, declaring that marriage is God's work, not just a human arrangement: "what has joined together [as one flesh], let no one separate."⁹

5. Genesis 1:27-28.

6. Genesis 2:18.

7. Genesis 2:24.

8. Genesis 2:25.

9. Matthew 19:3-6

This unity between husband and wife points in Scripture to an even more significant union: the eternal relationship between Christ and his Church. In Revelation 19, John hears a multitude singing with joy, "for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready."¹⁰ Soon after, John sees the New Jerusalem coming down "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband,"¹¹ and an angel takes him to see "the Bride, the wife of the Lamb."¹² The Bride and the Spirit beckon all who thirst to come and freely drink the water of life. The narrative arc of Scripture, which began with the uniting of two people in marriage, concludes with marriage as its central metaphor, where Christ unites for eternity with his people.

This metaphor is woven throughout the intervening Scriptures as well. It is especially prevalent in the major prophets. In Isaiah, for example, God says, "Your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name."¹³ So, God often portrays himself as a husband who finds a wayward and ashamed woman and compassionately takes her to himself.¹⁴ Other times he pictures himself as a spurned husband whose wife has been unfaithful; yet in faithful love, he seeks her out and brings her back to himself.¹⁵

Jesus also invokes the metaphor of marriage in his teaching about the Kingdom of God. In Matthew 22, for example, the kingdom of God is like a wedding feast, and in Matthew 25, it is like a Bridegroom coming for his bride while attendants wait. And in response to the Pharisees

10. Revelation 19:7.

11. Revelation 21:2.

12. Revelation 21:9.

13. Isaiah 54:5.

14. Ezekiel 16:9, for example.

15. Hosea 1-2, for example; also Jeremiah 31:32.

asking why his disciples do not fast, Jesus says, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?”¹⁶

Paul also uses the marriage metaphor, in Ephesians 5, for example, as a picture of the Gospel relationship between Christ and his Church. Husbands are to be like Christ to their wives, offering themselves in loving sacrifice, while wives are to be like the Church in loving submission and cooperation. Paul takes his argument back to the beginning, citing Genesis 2:24 to demonstrate that a man ought to love and care for his wife as he cares for his own body, because the two are one flesh. But he also argues that there is a deeper mystery revealed in marriage. In using the word “mystery,” Paul indicates this deeper purpose of marriage cannot be discovered on its own. Louw and Nida explain that Paul’s choice of the word “mystery” (Greek *mysterion*) refers to “that which has not been known before but which has been revealed.”¹⁷ This mystery is the unity of Christ and his Church. Just as a man and a woman are one flesh in marriage, so Christ and his Church are one body. From the beginning of creation, therefore, marriage was always about more than just two people. It was about the coming Christ and his Church, a riddle revealed finally through the Gospel. When husbands show faithful, self-giving love to their wives, and when wives give faithful, self-giving respect to their husbands, they demonstrate the Gospel to each other and everyone around them.

Marriage holds a special place in the narrative of Scripture as a picture of the Gospel, and every marriage is an opportunity to show the beauty of God’s faithful love for his people. The Enemy fights to destroy these living pictures of God’s goodness and inspires parodies to confuse

16. Mark 2:19.

17. Johannes P. Louw, and Eugene Albert Nida. 1996. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. New York: United Bible Societies, 344.

and cheapen the beauty of the design. The Church fights back against the Enemy's efforts by preaching the truth about marriage and elevating and strengthening marriages for the sake of the Gospel.

Biblical Support for Marriage Mentoring

This researcher has heard pastors in his denomination express the opinion that using marriage mentors may be unwise or inappropriate. The pastor-centered marriage ministry, they argue, has good reasons. The pastor officiates the wedding and should be able to say confidently that the couple is right for each other and ready for marriage. He is also the primary spiritual counselor who will help the couple when they struggle and should, therefore, know them well enough to give good personal advice. Finally, the pastor is the one appointed by the church to guard and shepherd the spiritual health of families in the congregation. Should he not, therefore, provide premarital counseling?

These pastors also argue that lay mentors may not have a complete biblical perspective. Lay mentors may buy into ideas and attitudes about marriage borrowed from modern culture in opposition to biblical teachings. Inadequately equipped, they may give unhealthy directions and incorrect advice. Some pastors have even expressed concern that lay mentors may use the relationship as an opportunity to gossip or badmouth their spouses.

While some of these arguments from pastors who resist lay mentors could be legitimate, others may simply reflect their fear of letting go. Besides, carefully selecting and training mentors would address most of the legitimate concerns; and more importantly, marriage mentoring is a biblically appropriate and much needed form of ministry. Scripture shows that all believers should be engaged in ministry, not just ordained ministers; and God's truth and wisdom are to be passed down from older and more experienced Christians to younger and less

experienced ones. The Bible provides significant examples of ministry structures that look like mentoring, which suggests that marriage mentoring, if done well, is appropriate.

Passing Down God's Truth and Wisdom

Scripture speaks often about how to pass truth and wisdom from one generation to the next. Older and wiser people are to pass on what they have learned. In Deuteronomy 6, for example, God instructed parents to pass his teaching on to their children in the context of daily life, talking about the commands of God when they sit at home, when they walk along the road, when they go to bed at night and when they get up. These commands should even be engraved on the doorframes of their houses. In other words, teaching the words and ways of God to the next generation is a primary responsibility of parents. It is also a great privilege.

The writer of Psalm 78 celebrates that he knows the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord because he learned of them from his ancestors. He, in turn, intends to pass down the stories of God's goodness. "We will not hide them from their children but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord."¹⁸ The Apostle Paul reemphasizes this instruction in Ephesians 6:4, writing, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

The Proverbs often repeat the theme that the righteous, who have gained wisdom from their godly lives, should share that wisdom with those who need it. Less experienced believers must attend to the righteous to gain their wisdom. For example, Proverbs 10:11 says, "The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life," and Proverbs 13:20 promises, "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise." "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another," says Proverbs 27:17. Scripture's theme is that believers pass on God's truth and wisdom from one believer to another.

18. Psalm 78:4.

Scripture records many examples of this theme in application, stories that demonstrate the value and purpose of believers sharing truth, wisdom and experience with each other. One example is in the story of Moses and the people of Israel, when Moses' father-in-law Jethro brings him good counsel on how to govern the people.

In Exodus 18, Jethro visits Moses and celebrates what God has done for the people of Israel. But then he expresses concern: "When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, 'What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?'"¹⁹ When Moses explains that he is responding to their complaints and concerns as judge, Jethro simply says, "What you are doing is not good."²⁰ The problem is not that Moses is teaching the people God's Word and judging between them; the problem is that Moses is doing it all himself. Jethro fears Moses will burn himself out, which will not serve anyone. So, he advises Moses to appoint wise, trustworthy men to serve as judges for groups of ten, a hundred, and a thousand, and to bring only the most serious matters before Moses. "If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace."²¹ Moses takes his father-in-law's advice and he and the people are blessed by it.

While the example of Moses and Jethro looks like a structure for ministry, a less formal example is found in Joshua 4. The people of Israel are crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land, and God performs a miracle, stopping the waters so they can walk on dry ground. As they finish crossing, God directs them to gather twelve stones from the riverbed, one for each tribe of

19. Exodus 18:14.

20. Exodus 18:17.

21. Exodus 18:23.

Israel. These are to be piled up as a memorial on the banks of the river. “When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD.”²² The stones are an object lesson parents can use to demonstrate the reality of God’s works. As in Deuteronomy 6, God is urging parents to tell their children the stories of God’s power and goodness, so that they also will trust in him.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is a more intimate example of the kind of one-to-one mentoring God’s Word encourages. Naomi’s husband and sons have died, leaving her a widow with two widowed daughters-in-law. Naomi urges them to go find new husbands, and while one of them, Orpah, takes this advice, Ruth refuses, insisting that she will continue to live with Naomi. She even insists that she will learn to worship the God of Israel as Naomi does. As the story progresses, Naomi gives Ruth guidance and direction in finding a new husband, wisdom which Ruth gladly accepts and obeys. The story ends in blessings for Ruth as well as Naomi in the birth of a child and a continuation of Naomi’s line. But the blessing does not end with them; that child is the next in the line of the Savior, demonstrating how powerfully God can use his people when they pass his wisdom and truth on from one generation to the next.

Jesus’ commission to his followers before his ascension shows that this is still God’s will for his people, even in the New Testament era Church. Jesus tells his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*”²³ What the disciples learned from Jesus they are to teach to those who will become disciples of Jesus through their

22. Joshua 4:6-7.

23. Matthew 28:19-20, emphasis added.

witness. That includes this command itself, to continue making disciples and continue teaching them all of Jesus' commands. Scripture's theme is that believers pass on God's truth and wisdom from one believer to another.

Ministry Belongs to All Believers

If every disciple of Jesus is to carry out the commission he gives in Matthew 28, then all disciples are to be engaged in the ministry of the Church. The writings of the Apostles throughout the New Testament affirm this. In Paul's letters to the Romans and the Corinthians, he uses the analogy of a body to illustrate that every member of the Church – that is, his body – has a role to play in the work of the Church. While not every Christian has the same role to fill, nor the same gifting, all Christians participate in the work of the ministry in their unique ways.²⁴

Paul is very clear in Ephesians 4 that those who hold the role, or office, of leadership in the Church exist to build up other believers to serve. “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”²⁵ Pastors do not exist to do all the work of the ministry on behalf of the people; rather, they exist to train the people to do the work of ministry on behalf of Christ.

One of the most often cited passages upholding the role of every Christian in the work of the Church is 1 Peter 2:9. “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Picking up on Peter's use of the term “royal priesthood,” Christians – especially Lutherans – have used this passage to express what is often called the

24. Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12.

25. Ephesians 4:11-12.

“priesthood of all believers.” For God’s Old Testament people, worship life and religious rituals were carried out by the priests and other members of the tribe of Levi. God’s people accessed God through the priests, who were intermediaries between God and the people. This was a special work to which God had called only a limited group. But Peter, speaking to Christians after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, is saying that all believers now belong to this "priesthood." All Christians now have direct access to God themselves, and all Christians are to do God’s work in the world.

The 16th-century reformer Martin Luther popularized this idea by regularly referring to believers as "priests." In one of his commentaries on the Psalms, he referred to "the general priesthood of all baptized believers,"²⁶ explaining that Christians are not separated into two "classes" – a priestly class and a common class. Rather, all Christians are "priests" before God. Luther did distinguish between the work of the laity and the work of the clergy. However, he wanted it to be clear that all Christians have the same status before God, even if they do not all have the same work or role to fill. "There is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests . . . between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do."²⁷

According to Luther, the clergy are called by the body of believers to do specific works on behalf of the body of believers. “We are all priests, as many of us as are Christians. But the priests, as we call them, are ministers chosen from among us. All that they do is done in our

26. Martin Luther, *Selected Psalms II*, in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, St Louis, MO: Concordia and Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1955-86, 13:332.

27. Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” in *Luther’s Works*, 44:129.

name; the priesthood is nothing but a ministry.”²⁸ An essential point here is that the work of the clergy is that which the laity calls on them to do. Luther would reject the idea that certain works belong solely to the clergy *because they are clergy*; those works belong to the clergy because the laity calls on them to do that work on their behalf. Therefore, when the clergy do their work, it is the work of the laity through the clergy. A pastor who might refuse to engage the laity in any particular ministry *because they are laity* has misunderstood the relationship and the nature of the call to ministry.

Ultimately, Luther's view was that the work of the Church belonged to the people of God, regardless of who was called upon to do that work. No command of Scripture limits the work of the Church to specific individuals. While certain roles mentioned by the Apostles, such as Elder or Deacon, may have involved special qualifications and responsibility, it is nevertheless given to the people of God to carry out the work of God in the world.

Paul's Instruction to Timothy and Titus

In his instructions to two young pastors, Timothy and Titus, Paul encourages a structure for carrying out the work of God in the world. Perhaps "structure" is too strong a word for how Paul expresses it, but it is useful here to think of Paul's instruction as setting a pattern. The pattern involves the ministry leader teaching older Christians to be teachers for younger Christians so that younger Christians can be encouraged to follow God's commands.

Timothy and Titus were Paul's proteges tasked by Paul with setting up ministry leadership in local churches and then returning to work alongside Paul. Timothy served in Ephesus, while Titus served on Crete. Both the mainland port city of Ephesus and the island of Crete, with its many cities, played essential roles in the Greek economy. Both were known for

28. Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *Luther's Works*, 36:113.

being progressive and pluralistic. Ephesus was more metropolitan, known for its wealth and lavish homes and structures, and for importing culture, religion, and philosophy. Crete was vital to securing the surrounding waters and providing a haven to ships; it was known more for its sexual liberty and prominent feasts.²⁹ Both Ephesian and Cretan cultures promoted individual and expressive rights to women, which were uncommon in other parts of the world. Crete even had a legal code that "accorded women certain freedoms not enjoyed by women elsewhere in the Greek and Roman world."³⁰ There was a growing trend throughout the Roman Empire, which was especially prevalent in Crete, which urged women to abandon the dress code that represented sexual modesty and fidelity, to indulge in sexual activity outside of marriage, and to take part in parties and feasting that involved drunkenness and gluttony. Abortion, contraception, and avoidance of childbearing were also common.³¹

Paul also warns both Timothy and Titus about circumcision and Jewish myths. Not only did these young pastors have to contend with progressive and libertarian values, they also faced the legalistic traditionalism of the Judaizers. The Christians Timothy and Titus led would be caught in the middle.³²

The situation these young pastors faced was not all that different from what pastors face in America today. Materialism, progressivism, libertarianism, pluralism, the clash between the traditional and the radical, and the rejection of family values; these are familiar struggles for churches and leaders today. Paul advises Timothy and Titus to make the most of the relationships

29. Philip H Towner, *The Letters To Timothy And Titus*, ebook Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006, <https://www.scribd.com/book/482220379/The-Letters-to-Timothy-and-Titus>, 141.

30. Towner, *The Letters To Timothy And Titus*, 144.

31. Towner, *The Letters To Timothy And Titus*, 145.

32. Towner, *The Letters To Timothy And Titus*, 153.

between believers in their congregations, encouraging the older and more mature to teach the younger and less mature.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul tells him, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”³³ Some see this as an encouragement to appoint qualified men to the pastoral office; a comment in *The Lutheran Study Bible* suggests precisely this. However, Fee points out that Paul's language is broader than this. The adjective translated “faithful” is the same that is elsewhere in Paul's letters translated “trustworthy” and “believing.” “The emphasis is on their reliable character, not their status.”³⁴ While he may have in mind the elders and deacons of 1 Timothy 3:1-7, his language is inclusive of any trustworthy believer who may pass on what he has learned.

Paul's instructions to Titus, however, clearly include all Christians who fit the description of “older.”

“Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled.”³⁵

33. 2 Timothy 2:2.

34. Gordon Fee, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus (Understanding the Bible Commentary Series)*, Ada, MI: Baker Publishing Group, Scribd Edition, <https://www.scribd.com/book/235007520/1-2-Timothy-Titus-Understanding-the-Bible-Commentary-Series>, 376.

35. Titus 2:2-6.

Paul is applying the deeply embedded theme of Scripture that God's truth and wisdom are passed down from older believers to younger ones. At the center of his instruction is the phrase "teach what is good;" the responsibility is laid on the older men and women to pass this on to younger men and women. "What is good" revolves around self-controlled, moderated behavior and domestic duties. Part of the content they are to pass down is how to behave in a godly manner despite ungodly culture and be faithful to one's duty as spouse and parent.

Paul does not use the term "mentor," and his instruction could be applied in settings other than one-to-one or couple-to-couple instruction. But Paul clearly believes that teaching and modeling Christian living will happen best through relationships between Christians of different generations. Titus is not to take on the sole responsibility of teaching Christian living himself; he is to recruit, equip, and instruct those who have wisdom and experience to pass it on to others.

Despite the objections of some pastors, and even though marriage mentoring is relatively new, it is an entirely biblical approach to marriage ministry. Scripture often presents the theme of God's truth and wisdom being passed down from generation to generation by believers in the context of personal relationships. The righteous are to pass down what they have learned. All believers are to be engaged in the ministry of the Church, not just those called to pastoral leadership. Furthermore, in the early Church, Paul encouraged the development of older Christians as teachers for younger Christians. Marriage mentoring, though just one application, is a biblical model for ministry. It is not the only application, but it is an effective one. It would provide the kind of intentional intergenerational relationship Paul describes here. It would be a way to encourage marriages that reflect the Gospel and communicate the Gospel to one another. A marriage mentorship program, therefore, fits within the paradigm of Scripture.

CHAPTER 3: Literature Review

One challenge for this thesis-project, which seeks to better understanding how to train marriage mentor couples, is that marriage mentoring has yet to be well-researched. There is, however, a great deal of literature about marriage. So, this chapter will narrow the scope of literature review to three areas: the state of marriage in America today, what marriages need to succeed, and the role mentoring can play in providing support, including some best practices for mentoring.

The State of Marriage Today

Andrew Cherlin's 2011 book, *The Marriage Go-Round*, claims that American families are "different from the rest of the world." In 2011, for example, 90% of U.S. residents were expected to marry, higher than any other developed nation. Americans also have the highest divorce rate.¹ They are quicker than people in other nations to begin and end cohabiting arrangements, as well, and start a new relationship after a breakup. "Having several partnerships is more common in the United States not just because people exit intimate partnerships faster but also because they *enter* them faster and after a breakup *reenter* them faster."² American families are different in that they experience "frequent marriage, frequent divorce, more short-term cohabitating relationships. Together these factors create a great turbulence in American family life, a family flux, a coming and going of partners on a scale seen nowhere else."³

According to Cherlin, this is because of a unique philosophical blend of marriage and individualism. American culture has a long history of being pro-marriage and a deeply embedded

1. Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today* (Vintage, 2010), 4.

2. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 15.

3. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 5.

sense of individualism which runs contrary to the spirit of marriage. Marriage culture is defined by three tenets: (1) that marriage is a given and being an adult means getting married; (2) that marriage is forever; and (3) that divorce is a last resort. Despite changes in culture, these tenets are still believed by most people. The culture of individualism, however, holds these tenets: (1) one's primary obligation is to oneself; (2) self-development and personal satisfaction are the key rewards of an intimate partnership; (3) individuals may choose how to arrange their intimate lives to get the most personal satisfaction; and (4) if a relationship or marriage is not satisfying, it can end.⁴

Americans approach marriage and individualism as a "toolkit," where they choose what they wish to use to get the most out of life. Unfortunately, this often leads to marital breakup if someone feels the marriage no longer provides what they want. Cherlin borrows the term "expressive divorce" from Barbara Whitehead, where people "judge the success of their marriages not by their material standard of living or how well they raised children but rather by whether they felt their personal needs and desires were being fulfilled."⁵

"The meaning of marriage has changed," says Cherlin, noting that culture, laws, and religious sentiment have shifted from a preference for maintaining the family to individual rights and personal fulfillment. "The relationship-based, self-oriented meaning... has become the predominant sentiment."⁶ Self-fulfillment is the highest priority, and Americans today want to marry only when they know that it will give them what they want and only after they are satisfied with their life before marriage. While marriage was once "almost a requirement for

4. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 30.

5. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 30-31.

6. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 130.

being a respectable adult," today marriage comes after establishing oneself – getting an education, beginning a career, and saving for a downpayment on a house. "Marriage's place in the life course used to come before those investments were made, but now it often comes afterwards. Whereas marriage used to be the foundation of adult family life, now it is often the capstone."⁷

In his 2020 book, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, Mark Regnerus applies Cherlin's theme of "foundations vs. capstones" to Christians. His team interviewed 190 churchgoing individuals in their 20's and 30's in seven countries to determine their perspectives on marriage, concluding that the view of marriage as a "capstone" is as prevalent today among Christians as non-Christians. As a result, just as many Christians are delaying marriage as the general population. Since delaying marriage is associated with increased cohabitation and premarital sex, among other troubles, churches should be concerned with this trend. Even more concerning is that the biblical ideal of marriage, where individuals give themselves sacrificially for the good of another, has been overtaken by a self-oriented perspective that puts the individual's needs and desires first. "Marriage seems increasingly a 'vehicle of self-actualization' rather than a setting for self-sacrifice."⁸

The wedding itself, Regnerus contends, has become a celebration of the individual rather than a coming together of the community around the couple: Elaborate proposals, customized vows, expensive photography and videography, and lavish parties. Simply holding a wedding has become incredibly expensive, further contributing to the delay of marriage. "The more that

7. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 139.

8. Mark Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 56.

marriage is repackaged and sold in the West as a capstone rather than a foundation, the higher up the social ladder it climbs."⁹ Regnerus calls this "the social justice issue of our time."¹⁰

Regnerus identifies three main factors, apart from general cultural pressure, contributing to the rise in this self-centered perspective on marriage: waning motivation for marriage (especially among men), the availability of "cheap sex," and widespread uncertainty about marriage. It is not, however, that young Christians do not understand what marriage is. "Whether the institutional Christian Church, spread throughout the world, knows it or not, its young people are not uneducated about what marriage is... Most understand that marriage requires sacrifice."¹¹

The capstone view, however, is robbing young men of motivation for marriage. "Christian or not, young adults are determined that marriage not curb their premarital material lifestyle."¹² Young people do not want their marriage to get in the way of living their dreams. Therefore, men especially feel pressure to provide a lifestyle, not just a home, security, and well-being. A man must allow his wife to pursue her goals and dreams, enjoy her life, and feel emotionally supported. Meanwhile, men still want the freedom to enjoy their own pursuits. Marriage feels increasingly unrealistic or unattainable.

The capstone view also contends that before marriage a couple must know if they are sexually compatible; sexual incompatibility means sexual boredom in marriage. Therefore, it is necessary to enjoy sex with a partner before marriage. But Regnerus argues that this is a myth

9. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 68.

10. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 40.

11. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 34-35.

12. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 59.

because "sexual chemistry is learned, not foreordained."¹³ Nevertheless, even Christian couples buy into the myth and "settle for marital substitutes."¹⁴ As marriage costs increase and couples delay marriage, waiting to have sex becomes less and less reasonable. However, this eliminates one of the driving factors that once inspired people toward marriage; when sex is available without commitment, commitment becomes less attractive.

The capstone view creates uncertainty about how to be successful in marriage as well. Young couples face pressure to find the right spouse, ensure they are compatible, and have their life in order. At the same time, they seem to lack supportive older figures to guide them. Seeing dysfunction and divorce in the marriages of their parents' generation, they manifest an almost "pathological fear" of marriage.¹⁵ Many young Christians express uncertainty that they can succeed in marriage. "Commitment should diminish uncertainty. But this is not how most men and women perceive marriage anymore."¹⁶

Finally, Regnerus offers eight pieces of advice for "revitalizing Christian marriage." Among those eight pieces of advice are four things which churches can prioritize: (1) telling exemplary stories; (2) creating marriage-friendly subcultures; (3) effectively preparing people for marriage; and (4) helping others navigate challenging marriages.¹⁷ He suggests that marriage mentoring would be especially helpful in achieving those goals. "If we lived in an era whose

13. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 113.

14. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 118.

15. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 130.

16. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 131.

17. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 162f. The other four pieces of advice Regnerus offers are: (1) Make the home a haven in a heartless world; (2) Parent: be mindful about the advice you give; (3) Consider allowing adult children to live at home before marrying – but only for the right reasons; (4) Experiment with prudent, targeted state investment in marriage.

norms and priorities were not so toxic to marriage and family life, marriage mentors might be helpful but not required. But the times have changed."¹⁸ Overall, Regnerus believes that Christians and churches must devote themselves to revitalizing Christian marriage, not only because it glorifies God but also because it is good for society. "Christian marriage is tightly linked to the future of marriage in general."¹⁹

Communio's 2023 *Nationwide Study on Faith & Relationships* agrees with this conclusion by Regnerus. Less than half of 18-30 years olds in America grew up in intact homes, yet among churchgoers of the same age group, more than 80% grew up with both mom and dad present. The trends of increasing divorce and changing family structures coincide closely with declining church attendance, and studies have shown that "the breakup of the family through divorce often produces religious non-affiliation among the children."²⁰ Fathers especially seem to impact a child's faithfulness. "A growing body of research on religion shows that a child's relationship with his or her father is critical for faith practice."²¹

The high correlation between stable families, present fathers, and faith commitment leads to the conclusion that churches must invest in marriage ministry to renew commitment in future generations. "Christians of all traditions must find ways to restore healthy marriages to our families, our churches, and throughout society more broadly if the gospel can hold and again gain ground in America and across the rest of the West."²²

18. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 176.

19. Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, 195.

20. JP DeGance, "Nationwide Study on Faith & Relationships," *Communio* (Jacksonville, FL, United States of America: Communio, 2023), <https://communio.org/study/>, 5.

21. DeGance, "Nationwide Study on Faith & Relationships," 7.

22. DeGance, "Nationwide Study on Faith & Relationships," 8.

What Marriages Need to Succeed

According to a recent Lifeway poll, more than 3 out of 4 Christian pastors offer counseling and resources to their members, 68% percent preach sermons about marriage at least a few times a year, and half offer seminars or workshops for marriage. Active churchgoers, however, report significantly less awareness of these offerings, and divorced churchgoers even less so. Only 16% of divorced Christians knew of marriage support ministries in their churches.²³ Perhaps even when churches offer support programs, they are not well advertised or accessible to those needing them.

Dr. John Gottman of the University of Washington has spent decades studying the characteristics of strong, happy, unhappy, and failed marriages. In his 1994 book *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, he summarized twenty years of research, explaining how they were able to predict with 94% accuracy whether couples would still be married in three years.²⁴ Gottman states that "A lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship."²⁵ His team found that in studying long-term marriages (20-40 years with the same partner), despite a wide variety of backgrounds, careers, lifestyles, and day-to-day patterns, there was a similarity between all of them in their discussions and how they manage disagreements: "a strong undercurrent of the two basic ingredients of love and respect."²⁶

23. Lisa Green, "Threat of Divorce Hard to Spot among Churchgoing Couples," *Lifeway Research*, August 3, 2021, <https://research.lifeway.com/2015/10/29/threat-of-divorce-hard-to-spot-among-churchgoing-couples/>.

24. John Gottman, John Mordechai Gottman, and Nan Silver, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last* (Simon and Schuster, 1995)., p. 20.

25. Gottman, *Why Marriage Succeed or Fail*, 28.

26. Gottman, *Why Marriage Succeed or Fail*, 61.

Gottman describes behaviors closely associated with marital unhappiness and dissolution. He identifies four conflict behaviors that he refers to as the Four Horsemen: Criticism, Defensiveness, Stonewalling, and Contempt. These behaviors lead to internalized negativity and an overall negative perception of the quality of the relationship. His advice for combatting these behaviors is to develop fondness and admiration (love and respect) and to break the cycle of negativity with four counter-behaviors: Calming, Non-defensive Speaking and Listening, Validation, and Overlearning (practicing). Couples who successfully establish a cycle of positivity tend to "glorify" their struggles, and Gottman identifies this as a sign of a strong marriage. "It's not that couples who glorify their struggles actually faced more troubles than less stable pairs. But they seem to garner more meaning and inspiration from their hardships."²⁷

Marriage skills like the ones Gottman describes can be taught in premarital education and marriage enrichment programs. Such programs, research shows, have a positive impact on marital stability and increase skills associated with long-term marital health.²⁸ One study found a 31% decrease in the likelihood of divorce when a couple engaged in a quality premarital program for at least six hours prior to marriage.²⁹ Research on the use of PREPARE/ENRICH, a research-based couple assessment and premarital program, showed that couples who had gone through the process increased in communication, conflict management, problem-solving, and

27. Gottman, *Why Marriage Succeed or Fail*, 224.

28. Jason S. Carroll and William J. Doherty, "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs: A Meta-Analytic Review of Outcome Research," *Family Relations* 52, no. 2 (2003): pp. 105-118, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2003.00105.x>.

29. Scott M. Stanley et al., "Premarital Education, Marital Quality, and Marital Stability: Findings from a Large, Random Household Survey.," *Journal of Family Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2006): pp. 117-126, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.20.1.117>.

overall relationship satisfaction.³⁰ Premarital education is something many young couples desire. "Of the 2.5 million couples who wed each year in America, more than a third of them want some form of marriage education."³¹

While Gottman's earlier work focused on conflict management skills as a source of marital strength, his more recent book, *The Science of Trust* (2011), emphasizes emotional attunement as the key. He maintains that dealing appropriately with conflict is still an essential factor. "Every couple, in their daily life together, messes up communication, and every relationship has a potential 'dark side.' What may matter most is the ability of couples to repair things when they go wrong."³² He adds another factor, which he refers to as "marital friendship," that he says builds on seven components: building love maps (an awareness and curiosity about your partner's worries and fears, hopes and dreams, values and goals); sharing fondness and admiration (love and respect); turning toward; maintaining a positive perspective; managing conflict; working together to make dreams come true; and creating shared meaning.³³

However, he writes *Science of Trust* to highlight that his further research has shown trust to be essential. "Happier couples, for whom trust was *not* missing, described the concept of 'trust' as the mysterious quality that somehow created safety, security, and openness for both of them."³⁴ His team found over multiple studies that "the most widely desired characteristic of a

30. Ted G. Futris et al., "The Impact of Prepare on Engaged Couples: Variations by Delivery Format," *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 10, no. 1 (2011): 69-86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332691.2011.539175>.

31. Les Parrott, Leslie Parrott, and David H. Olson, *Helping Couples: Proven Strategies for Coaches, Counselors, and Clergy* (Zondervan, 2021), 20.

32. John M. Gottman, *The Science of Trust: Emotional Attunement For Couples* (National Geographic Books, 2011), 14.

33. Gottman, *The Science of Trust*, 39-47.

34. Gottman, *The Science of Trust*, 39.

potential partner was that the person be trustworthy."³⁵ Trust, as Gottman defines it, involves "willingness to put oneself at risk, be it through intimate disclosure, reliance on another's promises, sacrificing present rewards for future gains, and so on."³⁶

A strong foundation of trust builds on what Gottman calls "emotional attunement." Emotional attunement occurs when one partner experiences intense emotion, and the other responds in a way that fosters warmth, security, connection, and emotional safety. He breaks it down with the acronym "ATTUNE" – Awareness of the emotion; Turning toward the emotions; Tolerance of the emotional experience; Understanding the emotion; Nondefensive listening to the emotion; Empathy toward the emotion.³⁷ This could occur in conflict, or it could occur when one partner experiences something separate from the marriage relationship. The key is how the other partner responds to the emotion.

Gottman contrasts a "negative story-of-us" pattern with a "positive story-of-us" pattern. "If switched to a positive story-of-us, the relationship will most likely take a very different trajectory, toward positive sentiment override, a buffer against momentary negativity or emotional distance."³⁸ Emotional attunement builds trust, which drives that switch from a negative to a positive perception of the relationship. People who feel their relationship is a positive force will not readily end the relationship, even when difficulties come their way. The task for married individuals is to start with a posture of concern for the other person and the relationship. "What is needed to build intimate trust is cooperation, not self-interest."³⁹

35. Gottman, *The Science of Trust*, 43.

36. Gottman, *The Science of Trust*, 46.

37. Gottman, *The Science of Trust*, 191.

38. Gottman, *The Science of Trust*, 212.

39. Gottman, *The Science of Trust*, 253.

Gottman is an Orthodox Jew, and biblical values inform his understanding of marriage and its value. Gottman even refers to Ephesians 5:22-33 when advising couples to cultivate love and respect. That same section of Scripture calls Christian husbands to sacrificial, Christ-like love and calls wives to sacrificial cooperation. Scripture calls Christians to have a selfless attitude in marriage, one committed to the good of the other person and the good of the relationship.

As a long-time pastor, Dr. Tim Keller delves deeper into Scripture than Gottman. His book *The Meaning of Marriage* (2011), which he co-authored with his wife Kathy, focuses on what he calls gospel-centered marriage. A gospel-centered marriage is one in which both husband and wife understand their marriage is about more than their happiness, self-fulfillment, or personal benefits. It is about living up to God's call to embody the gospel to one another.

Keller observes that all the societal objections to marriage today, often used as excuses for avoiding it or walking away from it, are surface-level objections. "Beneath these philosophical objections lies a snarl of conflicted personal emotions, born out of many negative experiences with marriage and family life."⁴⁰ People long for something more real, true, and intimate but also fear the depth to which biblical marriage calls them. Marriage is more than a societal construct; it is an institution from God with profound implications. "At the climax of the Genesis account of creation, we see God bringing a woman and a man together to unite them in marriage. The Bible begins with a wedding (of Adam and Eve) and ends in the book of Revelation with a wedding (of Christ and the church)."⁴¹ One can only understand this through the lens of the gospel, that "marriage was designed to be a reflection of the saving love of God

40. Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (Penguin Books, 2013), 4.

41. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 6.

for us in Jesus Christ. That is why the gospel helps us to understand marriage and marriage helps us to understand the gospel."⁴² This is why marriage is so hard; for two fallen human beings to embody the gospel is impossible without a force outside themselves. They cannot accomplish it without God's work in them. However, when they rely on him and allow his work in their lives, there are few things as powerful for shaping them into the people God wants them to be.

"Nothing can mature character like marriage."⁴³

Like Gottman, Keller emphasizes that self-focus and self-centeredness are incompatible with lasting marriage. Keller calls self-centeredness "the ever-present enemy of *every* marriage,"⁴⁴ "which puts a crushing burden of expectation on marriage and on spouses" and "leaves us desperately trapped between both unrealistic longing for *and* terrible fears about marriage."⁴⁵ He also observes that self-centeredness by its very nature blinds us to its presence in our hearts while simultaneously making us hyper-aware of it in others.

Because humans are broken by sin and naturally bent toward self-centeredness, the gospel must first save a person from devotion to self, which can then flow outward as selflessness in marriage. "Marriage only 'works' to the degree that approximates the pattern of God's self-giving love in Christ."⁴⁶ This requires that both husband and wife connect to the active work of the Spirit through the gospel. "To have a marriage that sings requires a Spirit-centered ability to serve, to take yourself out of the center, to put the needs of others ahead of your own.

42. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 8.

43. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 17.

44. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 55.

45. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 25.

46. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 43.

The Spirit's work of making the gospel real to the heart weakens the self-centeredness in the soul."⁴⁷

The benefits of gospel-centered marriage are as profound as the calling. Gospel-centered marriage gives the blessing of being fully known and fully loved. "To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God."⁴⁸ It brings with it spiritual friendship, which Keller describes as "a deep oneness that develops as two people, speaking the truth in love to each other, journey together to the same horizon."⁴⁹ It leads to companionship aiming beyond the struggles of this life; husband and wife help each other toward the goal of their faith. "What, then, is marriage for? It is for helping each other to become our future glory-selves, the new creations that God will eventually make us. The common horizon husband and wife look toward is the Throne, and the holy, spotless, and blameless nature we will have."⁵⁰ This is the high ideal of marriage that Scripture presents, and couples pursuing this ideal find their marriage much more valuable than anything they could find by walking away from it.

Keller also addresses those Christians who feel that cohabitation or divorce are acceptable alternatives to biblical marriage. He notes that because dating in our culture today is more focused on entertainment and sex than on personal connection, cohabitation seems to be the only way to get to know a person. Perhaps this is why it is so tempting, even for well-meaning believers. However, he also notes that cohabiting removes the safety of the legal status

47. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 56.

48. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 101.

49. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 127.

50. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 131.

of marriage. Cohabiting brings the need to constantly impress, entice, and perform to maintain the relationship. Cohabiting encourages the self-centeredness that works against gospel-centered marriage; concerns about performance turn a person inward, constantly evaluating if they are enough and if the other is enough. No wonder cohabitation often leads to divorce; if cohabitation is an attempt at practicing for an upcoming marriage, it is practicing self-centered marriage. Embracing gospel-centered marriage rejects performance-based relationships. It risks being bound to another. It commits to working for the good of the other and the relationship, all to the glory of God.

Ryan and Selena Frederick are the hosts of the popular marriage podcast, "Fierce Marriage," and authors of several books. Their 2020 book, *See-Through Marriage*, builds on many of the themes of Keller's *Meaning of Marriage*, such as the gospel-centered nature of biblical marriage and the blessing of being fully known and fully loved. *See-Through Marriage* carries these ideas forward as a call to husbands and wives to be transparent, to be radically honest with each other and with others. "It goes beyond semi-vulnerability and faux authenticity - the kind where you show just enough of your 'mess' to satisfy your Instagram followers or to pass another round of 'How are you doing?' in your weekly small group."⁵¹

The Fredericks contrast False Vulnerability with Meaningful Risk – where platitudes or generalities are replaced with specific naming of sins and struggles, admitting to the details as needed. They encourage true biblical fellowship – *koinonia* – the partnership and "sharing in" where Christians are called to walk side by side in the light. "To share your life and to share in someone else's life is to participate in their very existence – to have a real, tangible stake in who they are, how they're doing, what trials they're going through, and what successes they

51. Ryan Frederick and Selena Frederick, *See-Through Marriage: Experiencing the Freedom and Joy of Being Fully Known and Fully Loved* (Baker Books, 2020)., p. 18.

experience."⁵² This level of transparency and vulnerability leads to transformation – being more conformed to the likeness of Christ and growth in sanctification. "Transformation requires other people being involved, and oftentimes this starts with your spouse."⁵³

Many married couples are tempted to hide in isolation, especially when facing challenges. Even when we are present with others in the community of believers, we may keep our struggles and sins hidden and silent. The Fredericks warn against this temptation. "We must fight the urge to isolate ourselves when we feel ashamed, lost, afraid, or discouraged. The worst thing we can do as married Christians is to ignore our struggles and bury ourselves in screens, careers, parenthood, or other ways."⁵⁴

Part of the danger is that we fail to see or address the sins that bring death into our lives. Openness with others about our sins and struggles allows us to get help in addressing them so we can find grace and help in overcoming them. "It's impossible to sharpen and hold each other accountable if we're not honest about our real-time struggles. *Real time*. It's often the case that we talk about our sin in the past tense."⁵⁵ This is why the Christian community is so important. When people engage in a Christian community where they can be transparent and vulnerable, they benefit from being known and loved, and being called to Christ-like living.

However, the Fredericks note that it must be a gospel-centered community. The saving message of Jesus Christ must be its foundation. This gospel-centered community must also extend the forgiving love of Jesus and model the kind of grace Jesus himself gives. In that

52. Frederick, *See-Through Marriage*, 39.

53. Frederick, *See-Through Marriage*, 54.

54. Frederick, *See-Through Marriage*, 59.

55. Frederick, *See-Through Marriage*, 213.

community context, we can take the meaningful risks of opening ourselves up and addressing the deeper things that shape us, blessed by people who help us grow into the people God calls us to be. "Walking in the light means walking this life *with* others and not alone."⁵⁶ This becomes a vital source of support and strength for married couples to ward off the habits and attitudes that lead to divorce.

One intentional way for churches to foster such a Christian community for married couples is through the establishment of marriage mentorships. Premarital education in connection with mentor couples, research has shown, is more effective than simply attending a class or sessions with a counselor or spiritual leader.⁵⁷ For example, when PREPARE was conducted in small group settings using marriage mentor couples alongside a qualified facilitator, research found that the mentored couples not only gained confidence in skills associated with marital stability but also adjusted their marriage expectations and gained confidence in their future relationship. "Mentors were most beneficial to premarital couples when they were open and honest, shared their own marital experiences, normalized relational difficulties, modeled interpersonal skills, and provided practical advice."⁵⁸ Another study by a doctoral student at Denver Seminary found that premarital mentors were considered helpful by three-quarters of the newlywed participants for navigating sexual satisfaction during their first year of marriage.⁵⁹ Another project out of Denver Seminary determined that all newlywed

56. Frederick, *See-Through Marriage*, 225.

57. Steven A. Wages, and Darling, C.A., "Evaluation of a Marriage Preparation Program Using Mentor Couples," *Marriage and Family* 7, no. 2 (2004): 103-121.

58. Wages and Darling, "Evaluation of a Marriage Preparation Program Using Mentor Couples," 111.

59. Stan Craig, "Using Mentoring in Premarital Counseling for Improved Sexual Satisfaction in Marital Relationships," D.Min. Thesis, Denver Seminary, 2013.

participants responded favorably to the presence of marriage mentor couples, and had developed new relationships that they felt they could rely on for future help.⁶⁰

Bringing new couples into relationships with mentor couples offers many benefits. It fosters intergenerational connections, provides young couples with models of biblical marriage, and creates an opportunity for accountability and transparency that can ward off problems that might lead to divorce. Terry Gaspard of the Gottman Institute observes that "couples wait an average of six years of being unhappy before getting help,"⁶¹ which can be too late. But being mentored can enable a younger couple to identify their needs much sooner and encourage them to get the help they need. It can also help them learn how to be more vulnerable and share their feelings, which according to survey data cited by Olsen, Parrott and Parrott, 76% of couples wished their partner was better able to do. Finally, a mentoring relationship can help a younger couple develop realistic marital expectations and the means for communicating about them; and "misaligned expectations" are a serious problem for marital satisfaction.⁶²

What Mentors Need to Succeed

It seems clear that most churches would benefit from a community of mentoring couples, provided they are trained and equipped to carry out their role. But proper training and screening are critical. One doctoral project out of Regent University determined that many couples who express interest in being marriage mentors are either not qualified or have serious marital

60. Donna Larsen, "Will Mentoring Younger Couples by Older Couples Married Ten Years or More Increase Marital Satisfaction for Both Groups?" D.Min. Thesis, Denver Seminary, 1998.

61. Terry Gaspard, "Timing Is Everything When It Comes to Marriage Counseling," The Gottman Institute, February 3, 2021, <https://www.gottman.com/blog/timing-is-everything-when-it-comes-to-marriage-counseling>.

62. Parrott, Les, Leslie L. Parrott, and Olson David H L, *Helping Couples*, 11.

difficulties that could make them more of a liability than a help.⁶³ Fortunately, Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott have worked for two decades successfully training marriage mentor couples through their Marriage Mentor Academy, which provides the curricular basis for this thesis-project. The Parrots believe "marriage mentoring may be the most important thing you ever do for the young people in your church" contending that it "can literally increase the spiritual vitality of your entire congregation."⁶⁴ They see the training of marriage mentors as a critical way for pastors to carry out Paul's instructions in Ephesians 4 to equip God's people for works of service. And according to their research, 62% of churchgoing couples desire to connect with a marriage mentor couple.⁶⁵

In their *Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring*, Les and Leslie Parrott describe the traits and skills needed to be competent marriage mentors. They observe that while studies on mentoring have identified a long list of traits, according to their research, "when all of the traits are taken into account, three emerge as essential: warmth, genuineness, and empathy."⁶⁶ They define warmth as having "an attitude that does not evaluate or require change."⁶⁷ This kind of warmth, they explain, allows mentees to be relaxed and comfortable with their mentors; instead of feeling pressured to change, they are able to hear and accept advice and guidance. The Parrotts describe genuineness with words like "sincerity" and "authenticity," an openness about oneself

63. Elizabeth A. Wine, "A Community-Based Approach to Marital Enhancement," Thesis, Psy.D., United States -- Virginia, Regent University, accessed February 24, 2022.

64. Les Parrott and Leslie L. Parrott, *The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring: Connecting Couples to Build Better Marriages*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005, 22.

65. Parrott, *The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring*, 31.

66. Parrott, *The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring*, 44.

67. Parrott, *The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring*, 44.

that is not fake or phony. And they explain empathy as a “personality predisposition that enables you to take the focus off yourself.”⁶⁸ This is essential, they argue, because “Mentoring necessitates the ability to set aside your own interests to zero in on what's best for the mentorees.”⁶⁹ A person without empathy will find it difficult to mentor someone, because it is empathy that allows a mentor to enter into another person’s world, hear the emotions behind their words, and convey understanding and appreciation for the things that person is facing.

The Parrotts identify specific circumstances under which a couple should not mentor. For example, if one spouse (or both) is battling an addiction, if the couple is in a period of major transition or struggling with something like financial debt, or if they are still healing from grief or trauma, then they ought not mentor. Likewise, if their marriage is conflicted, they have a pessimistic attitude about marriage, or their view of marriage is not aligned with biblical principles, they are not fit to mentor. Coordinators for a marriage mentoring ministry should be careful to screen potential mentor couples for these caution flags.⁷⁰

For couples who are both personally and relationally healthy, mentoring is a way to intentionally serve other couples and help them build lasting marriages. But as W. Bradford Johnson, author of *The Elements of Mentoring*, says so well, effective mentors must be “accessible and approachable.”⁷¹ This means the relationship must be about more than the

68. Parrott, *The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring*, 46.

69. Parrott, *The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring*, 46-47. Note that the Parrotts consistently use the term “mentoree” rather than “mentee” throughout their work, even though the standard term is “mentee.”

70. Parrott, *The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring*, 49.

71. W. Brad Johnson and Charles R. Ridley, *The Elements of Mentoring: 75 Practices of Master Mentors*, 3rd Edition (St. Martin’s Press, 2018), 21.

communication of knowledge. It requires a personal relationship built on mutual respect, trust, and authentic self-disclosure, which "has the potential to create more poignant learning, more meaningful change, and an enduring bond."⁷² This requires an investment of time and emotional energy, and is, as Johnson says, a "responsibility not to be taken lightly. It entails many benefits, but many costs as well."⁷³ One of those costs is opening oneself up to another person, allowing another person to see into the often-hidden parts of life – the struggles, the challenges, the failures and the lessons learned.

Johnson describes the skills, the traits, and the actions of a competent mentor. He discusses skills like being present, communicating vision, affirming and encouraging, active listening, and promoting excellence. He talks about traits such as warmth, dependability, trustworthiness, and respect for others. And when it comes to actions, he elaborates on setting expectations, goals, and boundaries, while also protecting privacy, maintaining integrity, and safeguarding the relationship. Johnson writes to those who are in a position to mentor and gives the tools and information a mentor needs to be successful. However, Johnson does not explain how a potential mentor might find the training needed to become confident and comfortable in the mentoring role.

This is the case for many books in the areas of organizational leadership or business management. Mentoring is a popular concept and highly encouraged, and it is easy to find books and resources for leaders on how best to mentor. For example, John Maxwell, author of many books on organizational leadership, wrote a book titled *Mentoring 101: What Every Leader Needs to Know*. It is a manual for how to improve leadership effectiveness by adopting a

72. Johnson and Ridley, *The Elements of Mentoring*, 79.

73. Johnson and Ridley, *The Elements of Mentoring*, 212.

mentoring mindset, with tools and guidance on how to establish and maintain mentoring relationships. He starts with the simple premise, “Never work alone...Whenever you do anything that you want to pass along to others, take someone with you.”⁷⁴ Similarly, there are many guides available on how to find a mentor. Somewhere in between is the leader who wants to develop others to be mentors, and there are few books offering direct guidance for that task.

Organizations like MENTOR and the National Resource for Mentoring seek to fill this gap by providing training resources for potential mentors. Their focus is primarily on mentoring disadvantaged youth, and their mentor training targets the needs specific to that demographic. However, the general principles for mentoring are the same, and the resources they provide for training mentors focus first on those general principles, then the specific skills needed to help struggling youth. For example, one such resource, the *Mentor Tool Kit* from MENTOR, states that the first task of training must be to help potential mentors,

Become more skilled at developing caring mentoring relationships; learn about the challenges and barriers their mentees face and how to become more sensitive to those challenges and their effect on mentees; and gain confidence in their ability to make a difference in the lives of their mentees, which will motivate and sustain their enthusiasm for the program.⁷⁵

The tool kit recommends discussion and role-playing activities in the areas of setting expectations, communication skills, basic activities to be done with mentees, and what to

74. John C. Maxwell, *Mentoring 101: What Every Leader Needs to Know* (HarperCollins Leadership, 2008), 15.

75. MENTOR, ed., *How to Build an Effective Mentoring Program Using the Elements of Effective Practice*, Digital PDF (Boston, MA: MENTOR, 2005), <https://www.mentoring.org/>, 101.

do when things are not working out between the mentor and the mentee.⁷⁶ The training resources offered by MENTOR and the National Resource for Mentoring are research based and reviewed by experts in the field of youth mentoring. Their focus on practical skills taught through group discussions and practice activities may also provide a model for training of marriage mentors.

Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott likewise provide training for mentors, specifically for marriage mentoring. Their approach is not reliant on group activity, however. Their *Marriage Mentoring Academy* program uses digital materials, combining videos with journaling exercises. The video sessions include direct teaching of mentoring skills by the Parrotts along with testimonials from mentors and mentees and breaks for completing journal exercises. Couples register for the program, view the videos online, and complete the journal exercises and discuss them together. They then complete an assessment and receive a certificate indicating they are qualified as mentors.

Regi Campbell, author of *The Mentoring Manifesto* and *Mentor Like Jesus*, has a different approach to mentoring. Rather than focusing on the skills and traits a mentor needs, he argues that mentoring is simple, that it is “sharing what we've learned about living life with guys who are a few steps behind us on the path.”⁷⁷ According to Campbell, being a mentor does not require advanced knowledge, only experience and a willingness to share it. He uses the example of Jesus and his disciples to illustrate the process of mentoring, and says that the things Jesus did are “the key ingredients of next-generation mentoring.”⁷⁸ These ingredients are: (1) Jesus had a

76. MENTOR, ed., *How to Build an Effective Mentoring Program*, 102-103

77. Regi Campbell, *The Mentoring Manifesto: A Radical Plan to Change the World a Few Men at a Time* (B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 4.

78. Regi Campbell and Richard Chancy, *Mentor like Jesus* (B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 25.

purpose, (2) he was selfless, (3) he used a group context, (4) he handpicked his disciples, (5) he had a defined period of time, (6) he kept Scripture at the center, (7) he prayed often, (8) he modeled faith and action, (9) he taught along the way, (10) he was committed to his disciples and expected commitment from them, and (11) he planned for multiplication.⁷⁹ Like Jesus, Campbell says, a mentor lives alongside a mentee to show the mentee what their life should be. "Mentoring is about showing someone how to be something."⁸⁰

Campbell recognizes that transparency and self-disclosure can be a challenge for some mentors. He employs the strategy of small group mentoring, a setting where those who need mentoring and those who can mentor meet together and begin the process of connecting. "Before a man is going to be vulnerable... he's got to be transparent. That happens when he trusts... when he's become convinced that the environment and the people he's with are safe."⁸¹ The group setting is less intimidating than a one-on-one environment. The same could apply to preparation for mentoring; a group setting offers a less intimidating place for learning how to be transparent and practice authentic self-disclosure before doing so individually with a mentee couple. He also comments, "the beauty of a mentoring group is that it has a defined end."⁸² A limited process makes committing and moving to the next step easier. This gives potential mentors a goal to aim toward and a definite transition from training to mentoring.

79. Regi Campbell and Richard Chancy, *Mentor like Jesus*, 26-27.

80. Regi Campbell and Richard Chancy, *Mentor like Jesus*, 41.

81. Regi Campbell and Richard Chancy, *Mentor like Jesus*, 30.

82. Regi Campbell and Richard Chancy, *Mentor like Jesus*, 76.

Conclusion

The meaning of marriage in America has changed. Where it once was seen as a foundation for a stable life, now it is a capstone, an achievement earned by establishing a career, financial stability, and a sense of being “ready” for the challenge of married life. Marriage is still important to many Americans, but the pressure of expectations leads young people to uncertainty and delayed marriage. This does not, however, prevent them from entering living arrangements with a significant other. But without the commitment and legal ties of marriage, these living arrangements are just as likely to end.

With this capstone view of marriage comes the view that marriage is for one’s personal fulfillment, a means for meeting one’s social and emotional needs. When the marriage is no longer meeting these needs, couples consider divorce the better option. Instead of seeing marital challenges as adversity to face together, couples tend to see them as signs that it is time to move on. Divorce, however, brings its own pains and regrets.

While it is true that maturity and stability are important, they are not the only factors that make a marriage successful. Successful marriages also involve mutual love and respect, a positive view of each other and the relationship, healthy communication and conflict resolution, a sense of meaning and purpose to the relationship beyond personal fulfillment, and a supportive community of family and friends. A couple who develops these assets has a good chance of a lasting marriage even if they are young. The Church can support young couples and equip them with many of these skills and assets and give them the confidence that they can have a strong and lasting marriage.

One way the Church can do this is by providing marriage mentors. Mentors provide a safe place to discuss challenges, model healthy attitudes and behaviors, teach important life

skills, and provide a supportive community for less experienced couples. Some church members may already possess the traits and skills needed to be effective members, but many will need or desire some kind of training to increase their confidence and their comfort with the transparency mentoring requires. Marriage mentor training resources exist, and using those resources in a group setting may be an effective way to help potential mentors become more comfortable with transparency and self-disclosure as they work on the skills needed for mentoring.

CHAPTER 4: Project Design and Implementation

The previous chapters of this thesis-project have explained the rationale for a project related to marriage mentor training, provided a review of the literature pertinent to the topic, and offered a theological basis for marriage mentoring as a biblical form of ministry. This chapter details the process used to answer the research question and the results of that process. Again, the research question explored in this study is, "When presented in a small group format, what impact does the Marriage Mentor Academy training program have on couple confidence, comfort with vulnerability, and a biblical understanding of marriage?" This researcher hypothesized that a group cohort approach to training may be an effective means to accomplish the three-fold goal of developing biblical competency, mentor confidence, and comfort with vulnerability. The results will demonstrate to what extent this hypothesis was correct.

Overview of the Project

Nine volunteer couples from St. Mark Lutheran Church in De Pere, WI¹ participated in a six-session group training using the Marriage Mentor Academy curriculum developed by Doctors Les and Leslie Parrot.² The couples completed a pre-training and a post-training questionnaire that evaluated their understanding of biblical truth about marriage, their confidence as mentors, and their comfort with vulnerability. Their responses demonstrate the impact of the training on these three dimensions. Couples from the test group participated in a post-training interview as well, to provide additional feedback and insights on the quality of the training and their interest in serving as marriage mentors.

Selection and Arrangement of Training Curriculum

1. This researcher serves on the pastoral staff at St. Mark Lutheran Church as Family Minister.

2. "Marriage Mentoring - Connecting Couples to Build Better Marriages.," Marriage Mentoring, June 17, 2020, <https://www.marriagementoring.com/>.

Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott developed the Marriage Mentoring Academy program and launched it in 2012 as an online tool for training marriage mentors. They based it on their previously published resource, *The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring Kit*, published in 2005.³ This researcher chose this program for three main reasons. First, it is an established program which, according to its website, has trained more than 250,000 marriage mentors. Second, according to Dr. Les Parrott in an email, no empirical evidence exists regarding its effectiveness in a group setting, which means it is a valuable study. Third, the ready availability of the materials means the training can be modified and duplicated in other congregations.

The Marriage Mentoring Academy program delivers training to couples through online videos and activities. It has nine video sessions ranging from ten to thirty minutes and a journal that couples download and print out. Couples use the journal to keep notes during the videos, complete activities during and after, and then share their responses. The program also offers additional resources to couples as part of an online membership.

This researcher adapted the program to fit into six sessions. Nine sessions were proposed initially. However, after consulting with the group about schedules and availability, it was decided to reduce the number of sessions to six. Some sessions involved one video, others two videos, with discussion time between each video.

Couples were enrolled in the online Marriage Mentoring Academy system so that they would have access to the videos and materials outside of the training sessions. They were encouraged to review the videos as needed. Everyone received a printed copy of the journal. Sessions included personal sharing, viewing of the videos, and discussion based on specific questions and activities from the journal. Couples completed journal pages after each session and

3. "Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott - Pioneers of Marriage Mentoring," Marriage Mentoring, April 30, 2020, <https://www.marriagementoring.com/about>.

discussed their answers together. Appendix A details the topics covered, the discussion questions used, and the journal pages assigned.

Selection of Participants

The pastoral staff at St. Mark recommended a list of twenty potential participant couples. They used the following criteria: (1) regular in worship attendance; (2) demonstrated spiritual maturity; (3) active in serving; (4) a reputation for a solid marriage. Each potential couple received a letter of invitation describing the project and its purposes and detailing the expectations. No compensation was offered. Couples received follow-up communication a week later unless they responded immediately.

From the initial list of twenty, six couples agreed to participate. All others either declined or did not respond. The pastoral staff recommended an additional ten couples, and three more agreed to participate. Therefore, the group totaled ten couples, including the researcher (who served as discussion facilitator) and his wife. The ages of participants ranged from mid-20s to upper-60s, with the youngest couple being married just over two years and the oldest couples being married more than twenty-five years. More than half of the couples were married between ten and twenty years. Not all participants were able to attend every session, but two couples were present for all sessions, five attended all but one, and two missed a second session due to illness.

Questionnaire

All participants completed a questionnaire delivered electronically using Google Forms, both prior to and after the training. The pre-training questionnaire was completed between April 6 and 16, 2023, and the post-training questionnaire was completed between June 4 and 24, 2023. It included three sections: (1) biblical understanding of marriage, (2) confidence about mentoring, and (3) comfort with transparency and openness. Each section contained nine

statements – eight content statements and one summary statement. Participants rated their agreement to each statement on a four-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The questionnaire also included an optional space for comments and demographic questions about the gender of the participant and number of years married. Participants identified themselves on the questionnaire with a self-selected four-digit number, which they used for both questionnaires so that their answers could be compared while preserving anonymity.

The post-training questionnaire added three questions: Couples were asked if they were able to attend all the sessions in person, and if they were able to complete all the sessions even if not in person. Finally, they were asked to describe in a comment how their understanding of marriage mentoring changed or grew throughout the training. Appendix B provides a sample of both versions of the questionnaire. Nineteen participants completed the pre-training questionnaire, however only sixteen opted to complete the post-training questionnaire.⁴

Feedback Interviews

Couples were also invited to participate in a brief post-training interview to provide an opportunity to give more specific feedback about the training and suggestions for how to improve. The interviews were conducted at the St. Mark church campus between June 4 and June 15, 2023, and audio of the interviews was recorded. Appendix C provides the base questions used in the interviews and chapter five of this thesis-project includes examples of those comments. Seven couples opted to participate in the post-training interviews; Appendix D provides transcripts of these interviews.

Results

4. This researcher did not fill out either questionnaire. His wife completed a pre-training questionnaire but did not complete a post-training questionnaire. One other couple did not complete the post-training questionnaire.

Questionnaire Results

Table 1 displays the results of the pre-training and post-training questionnaires in terms of the average of all responses. Because only sixteen participants completed the post-training questionnaire, the data displayed in Table 1 uses only the answers from those sixteen when figuring the averages for the pre-training questionnaire.

Statement	Pre-Training	Post-Training
God is the author of marriage and he defines its meaning and purpose.	4	4
God ordained marriage at creation and set the pattern for marriage for all people of all time.	3.94	3.87
Marriage is defined as the lifelong union of a man and a woman.	3.87	3.94
The foundation of a marriage is the commitment made between two people.	3.06	3.5
Marriage is a reflection of the love between Christ and the Church: Husbands are to love like Jesus, wives are to submit like the Church.	3.87	3.87
Marriage is intended to be permanent; divorce is only permitted in cases of unfaithfulness, abandonment or abuse.	4	4
Couples should live separately prior to marriage.	3.69	3.75
Couples should abstain from sex prior to marriage.	3.75	3.69
Couples should view marriage as a commitment and responsibility, even if they feel they have fallen out of love.	3.75	3.87
I am intentional about growing in my faith and knowledge through regular study of God's Word.	3.75	3.81
I regularly seek to improve myself as a spouse and make my marriage the best it can be.	3.37	3.44
I feel confident in my ability to explain what the Bible teaches about marriage.	3.56	3.56
I believe I can be a good listener and hear another person's story.	3.43	3.44
I would feel comfortable building rapport with another couple as I mentor them.		
I understand what a strong marriage requires and feel confident leading another couple toward growth.	3.25	3.19
I believe I would be able to answer difficult questions another couple might ask, or point them to someone who can.	3.44	3.56
I would recognize potential red flags for another couple and boldly and lovingly confront them.	3.12	3.44
Overall, I am confident that I can be a marriage mentor to another couple.	3.12	3.31
I believe I understand what is most important in my life and marriage.	3.87	3.75
I enjoy getting to know other people and sharing about my own life and viewpoints.	3.44	3.31
I feel comfortable sharing my story and being transparent about my struggles.	3.37	3.37
I am able to be open about my failures and how I have worked to resolve them.	3.25	3.5
I feel comfortable praying with and for another person in their presence.	3.37	3.25
I believe I can be myself, even with people I don't know well.	3.31	3.56
I am able to confront another believer's sin with truth and grace.	3.06	3
I am able to share God's grace with another believer and how it has impacted my life.	3.56	3.62
Overall, I am comfortable being transparent and authentic as a marriage mentor to another couple.	3.37	3.56

5. Response options to each statement were on a four-point scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree.

Table 2 describes the difference between the pre and post training questionnaires in terms of number of participants whose responses changed for each statement, and whether their response indicated an increase or decrease in agreement.

Statement	Increased	Remained the Same	Decreased
God is the author of marriage and he defines its meaning and purpose.	0	16	0
God ordained marriage at creation and set the pattern for marriage for all people of all time.	1	13	2
Marriage is defined as the lifelong union of a man and a woman.	2	13	1
The foundation of a marriage is the commitment made between two people.	6	9	1
Marriage is a reflection of the love between Christ and the Church: Husbands are to love like Jesus, wives are to submit like the Church.	1	14	1
Marriage is intended to be permanent; divorce is only permitted in cases of unfaithfulness, abandonment or abuse.	0	16	0
Couples should live separately prior to marriage.	2	13	1
Couples should abstain from sex prior to marriage.	0	15	1
Couples should view marriage as a commitment and responsibility, even if they feel they have fallen out of love.	4	10	2
I am intentional about growing in my faith and knowledge through regular study of God's Word.	1	14	1
I regularly seek to improve myself as a spouse and make my marriage the best it can be.	4	9	3
I feel confident in my ability to explain what the Bible teaches about marriage.	5	9	2
I believe I can be a good listener and hear another person's story.	1	14	1
I would feel comfortable building rapport with another couple as I mentor them.	1	14	1
I understand what a strong marriage requires and feel confident leading another couple toward growth.	1	14	1
I believe I would be able to answer difficult questions another couple might ask, or point them to someone who can.	2	11	3
I would recognize potential red flags for another couple and boldly and lovingly confront them.	6	9	1
Overall, I am confident that I can be a marriage mentor to another couple.	6	7	3
I believe I understand what is most important in my life and marriage.	1	12	3
I enjoy getting to know other people and sharing about my own life and viewpoints.	1	13	2
I feel comfortable sharing my story and being transparent about my struggles.	4	8	4
I am able to be open about my failures and how I have worked to resolve them.	4	11	1
I feel comfortable praying with and for another person in their presence.	4	6	6
I believe I can be myself, even with people I don't know well.	6	8	2
I am able to confront another believer's sin with truth and grace.	3	9	4
I am able to share God's grace with another believer and how it has impacted my life.	2	13	1
Overall, I am comfortable being transparent and authentic as a marriage mentor to another couple.	3	13	0

The results show only minor differences in biblical understanding from pre-training to post-training. The only meaningful change in this category was regarding the statement, "The foundation of marriage is the commitment between two people." The average agreement with

this statement increased from 3.06 to 3.5, representing six individuals whose agreement increased: two who went from "agree" to "strongly agree," one who went from "disagree" to "agree," one who went from "strongly disagree" to "agree," and two who went from "disagree" to "strongly agree." No other statement relating to biblical understanding of marriage showed significant results. However, the majority of the participants indicated either "agree" or "strongly agree" with nearly all of the statements in this category.

The statement, "Overall, I am confident that I can be a marriage mentor to another couple," saw an average increase in agreement from 3.12 to 3.31. This represents six individuals who went from "agree" to "strongly agree," and three individuals went from "strongly agree" to "agree." Another statement related to confidence which saw notable results was, "I would recognize potential red flags for another couple and boldly and lovingly confront them." The average agreement with this statement went from 3.12 to 3.44. This represents four individuals who went from "agree" to "strongly agree," two who went from "disagree" to "agree," and one who went from "strongly agree" to "agree."

The statement, "Overall, I am comfortable being transparent and authentic as a marriage mentor to another couple," saw an average increase in agreement from 3.37 to 3.56. This represents three individuals who went from "agree" to "strongly agree." The other notable change in this category was with the statement, "I believe I can be myself, even with people I don't know well." The average agreement with this statement went from 3.31 to 3.56. This represents five individuals who went from "agree" to "strongly agree," one who went from "disagree" to "agree," one who went from "agree" to "disagree," and one who went from "strongly agree" to "agree."

There were few comments on the pre-training questionnaire. Those comments expressed mostly hesitation but a willingness to learn. One comment clarified the individual's disagreement with the statement, "The foundation of marriage is the commitment between two people," ie., he felt a statement about the foundation of marriage should include reference to God in some way.

The post-training questionnaire produced significantly more comments. Some individuals expressed newfound confidence in being mentors. For example, one individual commented, "After going over all the courses, I have a better understanding of the issues that can happen while mentoring and the best way to prevent/resolve them." Another commented simply, "I feel confident about being a marriage mentor." Many individuals expressed the understanding that mentoring does not require a perfect marriage. For example, "My understanding grew in the fact that it doesn't take the perfect couple to be mentors and it doesn't take the perfect answer to every question to be able to help improve the relationship of the couple you are mentoring."

A few individuals expressed appreciation for the practical tools and guidance the training offered, as well as the perspectives they received from the group discussions. For example, one individual commented, "It was helpful to watch the tips and ideas from the other couples that have mentored. I appreciated the discussion that was had after the videos, it helped to clear up any confusion or questions." Several commented that mentoring involves genuine relationships, rather than delivering a program. As one individual wrote, "It's more about building an authentic relationship vs. just telling another couple what might work for their marriage."

Themes from Feedback Interviews

Several consistent themes arose in the feedback interviews. The most consistent and frequently cited was appreciation for the diverse perspectives of the group training approach. "Doing it in a group setting you hear a lot of different opinions and a lot of different viewpoints

on the same thing. So it can help you learn more and see more.”⁶ Every couple interviewed commented positively about the discussions during the group sessions.

Another highly consistent theme, expressed by almost every couple, was that having gone through the training they felt confident that they could serve as mentors. One individual commented during the interview that she felt less confident initially after the training. However, she later said in a separate conversation (not part of the interview) that after additional thought and conversation with her husband, she believed that she could serve as a mentor.

A theme that arose in more than half of the interviews was the desire for more, as one couple phrased it, "nuts and bolts" training. That is, they were hoping for more direction on how to connect with and establish a relationship with a mentee couple, how to plan and conduct meetings, and how long to maintain the mentor-mentee relationship. “It would be nice if there’s a plan established,” said one participant. “Here’s the training, now here’s where we can plug you in.”⁷ In fact, most of the couples interviewed were interested in knowing what structures would be put in place in the congregation to bring mentors and mentee couples together.

Another theme that arose in more than half of the interviews was the desire for more training in how to handle difficult situations.

“What’s something that’s frozen all of those mentor couples completely in their tracks. And I get it. This is just like an overview kind of video, but I mean that’s the kind of stuff that I think people are going to really need to know. I mean, yeah, I can love them. And tell them that Christ loves them. But at some point, you know, you got to be able to answer them constructively.”⁸

6. Appendix D, couple 3, 103.

7. Appendix D, couple 7, 118.

8. Appendix D, couple 4, 106.

While couples acknowledged that the training about red flags was helpful, they wanted more time spent on what to do if their mentees are facing especially difficult challenges.

One more theme expressed by a few couples was the desire for more guidance from God's Word. They felt that the training, while high quality, was largely devoid of any discussion around what the Bible has to say about marriage. They expressed that they would have liked to see specific directions for where to point their mentees in Scripture when certain questions arise.

Reflection on Results

Observations on the Questionnaire Results

As noted above, there was little meaningful shift in the participants' biblical understanding of marriage. Of course, this could have resulted from the fact that most participants began with a clear understanding since they were selected based on their spiritual maturity. The lack of a strong biblical component in Marriage Mentoring Academy, however, could also have contributed. While the researcher was interested to see if participants who had faulty or limited understandings would find correction from the group, essentially "learning by osmosis," there is no evidence that such learning took place.

The only question in the biblical section that did see a shift was the one relating to the foundation of marriage. As noted, some couples initially objected to the wording of the statement but expressed higher agreement with it after the training. Most likely this had less to do with gaining a new understanding than simply reading the statement differently the second time around. At least that is what the post-training discussion seemed to reveal.

In contrast to the questions on biblical understanding, the questionnaire results definitely show that there was a positive shift in mentoring confidence for some participants. Most of the individuals appear to have had some level of confidence to begin with. Once again, the selection

of mature couples may be a contributing factor. Nevertheless, the fact that six people expressed increased confidence indicates that for some the training was effective.

There was, however, a negative shift in confidence for a few; and the post-training interviews shed some light on why this occurred. Two individuals spoke up in their interviews about their decreased confidence. For one thing, they found the process of mentoring to be more involved than they initially thought and were intimidated by the commitment. For another, during the training they felt inadequate because they had not personally experienced enough difficulty in marriage to address troubling situations for another couple. The people who shared these comments were among those who wished for clearer structure and more training on dealing with difficult situations. Perhaps if the training had included these elements, they would have been more likely to maintain or increase their confidence.

Another key question this thesis-project sought to answer was what impact the group training would have on the participants' comfort with transparency and openness. The results show that for some individuals there was a positive shift toward higher levels of comfort. As with confidence for mentoring, many of the individuals already seemed comfortable with transparency before the training. This may be due to the culture of St. Mark, where community and authentic relationships are part of the St. Mark philosophy of ministry. All members are encouraged to be part of small groups that foster open prayer and personal sharing; and the St. Mark program on Transformational Discipleship heavily emphasizes living with transparency. So, the culture of St. Mark probably contributed to a certain level of comfort with transparency and openness for the participants. Still, some grew in their levels of comfort due to the training. In addition, the training led to increased agreement with the statement, "I believe I can be myself,

even with people I don't know well." The experience of being open with other couples in the training cohort and finding it non-threatening appears to have had a positive impact.

Observations on the Feedback Interviews

Some couples expressed concern about the lack of biblical direction in the training program. This feedback is significant because it highlights a concern expressed by some pastors this researcher interviewed, who thought lay mentors might lack the biblical wisdom needed to provide pre-marital counsel. Though the curriculum did offer a biblical perspective, future iterations of the training, therefore, should probably incorporate more biblical training and discussion.

Couples also shared a reasonable desire for structure and “next steps.” Building that kind of structure would be helpful in increasing mentor confidence. When offering this training in the future, it will be important to have the mentoring structure in place before the training concludes.

Couples expressed a desire for additional training sessions on trouble situations and red flags as well. This may be helpful, but perhaps just as helpful is the suggestion from some couples that the cohort continue meeting monthly or quarterly after the training is ended. This would be an opportunity to continue the relationships they had built with each other, to support each other in their mentoring, and to discuss specific situations and how to address them. Such meetings may be more effective than adding extra training sessions.

One of the challenges this project faced was lining up schedules for all participants. Only two couples were able to attend every session. The rest missed at least one session. Several couples talked about this in their interviews, saying that they would have liked to have been able to attend every session. Some suggested that future trainings might include a covenant or written commitment. However, those who missed some sessions and completed them online at home

reflected that the privacy of the home environment allowed them to open up and discuss their own marriage more deeply. They preferred the group setting, but the combination of both group and at-home training was not as detrimental as they were afraid it would be.

Conclusion on Results

This thesis-project was successful in training several couples to be confident as mentors for St. Mark Lutheran Church. Through group training conducted over six sessions, nineteen individuals completed the training, and sixteen provided meaningful feedback on the process. The results demonstrate that for several individuals, the training had a positive effect on their confidence for mentoring and comfort with vulnerability. The qualitative data provided through comments and interviews suggest that it was not only the use of a training curriculum that produced the positive effect. Rather, the group environment itself contributed to the positive effect. This researcher hypothesized that offering marriage mentor training in a group setting would be an effective way to help couples be more confident as mentors and more comfortable with vulnerability. The results suggest that this hypothesis is correct. There were, however, limitations to the research design, and limitations to the effectiveness of the training.

Limitations to the Research

The project does not prove that group training is superior to individual training. It only demonstrates that using the training in a group setting produces positive results, and that participants appreciate the group setting. It also does not prove that the Marriage Mentoring Academy training program is the best method for training mentor couples. It only demonstrates that this training program is a sufficient base for a group training effort. Finally, this project does not provide answers for what might happen if a couple came into the training lacking a biblical understanding of marriage, or was very low in confidence and comfort with vulnerability. The

process of selecting participants did not allow for experimentation with couples who were not already solid candidates for marriage mentors. Further research is needed to determine what kind of training would be needed to develop less qualified couples into qualified marriage mentors.

Limitations to the Training

This project revealed three main deficit areas in this training. First, it lacks sufficient biblical content; for couples who want to guide others with Scripture, there is a need and desire for solid biblical direction. Second, it lacks clear steps for connecting mentor couples to mentee couples. This is less a limitation on the design of the curriculum as much as it is a need for structure in the implementation. Any pastor or ministry leader choosing to use this curriculum will need to plan that structure. Third, the training needs more time spent on addressing difficult situations that some couples will face. Mentors need to know what to do when their mentee couples are struggling with less common or more severe challenges. That could be addressed through additional training or through follow-up meetings. But it ought to be addressed.

Despite the limitations, group training appears to be a valid approach for training marriage mentor couples. The final chapter of this thesis-project will be devoted to recommendations for improvement and for future research. There will also be a discussion of next steps for marriage mentor ministry at St. Mark Lutheran Church.

CHAPTER 5: Outcomes and Conclusion

Chapter 1 of this study explained the rationale for a thesis-project focused on training marriage mentor couples. Chapter 2 reviewed literature relating to marriage in American society today, the kind of support marriages need, how mentoring provides that support, and some best practices for mentoring. Chapter 3 provided a theological basis for marriage mentoring as a biblical form of ministry. Chapter 4 examined the results of a cohort-based marriage mentor training at St. Mark Lutheran Church to determine its impact on participants' biblical understanding of marriage, their confidence for mentoring, and their comfort with the transparency and openness that mentoring requires.

The purpose of this thesis-project was, in short, to find out the value of group training for marriage mentoring. This researcher suspected, and hoped, that group training would be an effective way to produce willing marriage mentor couples. Past attempts to recruit marriage mentors had been unsuccessful, and one of the major barriers to recruiting was the level of transparency and vulnerability mentoring requires. This researcher hypothesized that putting married couples together in a group for training would overcome some of that hesitation. It would allow couples to experience self-disclosure without the pressure of being responsible for mentoring. The fact that this project resulted in several couples who are ready and willing to serve as mentors suggests that the group approach works.

Feedback from Participant Couples

Value of Group Training

The feedback received in the interviews further highlights the value of the group approach. Every couple interviewed commented on the fact that they appreciated the time spent together. They found that the group setting offered a variety of input, a sense of accountability, and, perhaps most importantly, connection with each other.

A few couples specifically commented on how much they appreciated the experience of getting to know one another. The first session began with each couple simply telling the story of their marriage – how they met, what they find special about their relationship, and one particularly memorable experience together. This personal sharing helped everyone see that every marriage has its struggles. One couple commented, “I really liked our first session where we got to know some of the other couples and I think just that in and of itself helped alleviate some of the, ‘Am I qualified to do this?’ I think all of us admitted that, you know, there are no perfect marriages.”¹

Another couple commented that hearing the stories of other couples was both personally “fascinating” and impactful on their family. “Our daughter, our oldest daughter, had just recently gone through a breakup,”² they said. Then they told the story of how their college-aged daughter had just ended a rather long and serious relationship, and as parents they were concerned about how to help her recover. Hearing the stories of other couples gave them new insights into how they could communicate hope to their daughter.

Several couples also commented on the diversity of input and experience that everyone brought to the table. One couple said,

I like that it was in a group setting and that we could bounce ideas off of other couples, because I thought there was some really insightful ideas from...the age difference, and [from] newly married couples and longtime married couples, [as well as] older couples who haven't been married a long time.³
Another participant commented, “The group thing is nice because you kind of hear other people’s ideas and sometimes it kind of reaffirmed what you were thinking, but then there were

1. Appendix D, Couple 2, 100.

2. Appendix D, Couple 1, 97.

3. Appendix D, Couple 4, 104.

like, ‘Oh yeah, that's a good point.’”⁴ The youngest couple involved in the project found the group especially helpful, as they saw how valuable those years of experience around them could be. “And having the group setting and being able to go back to the people that you were in the group with is beneficial because maybe they have more experience than that and you can kind of work together to be as good as possible.”⁵ One couple even noted that the insights and discussion with other couples drove them to deeper conversation after the meeting. “Every time we left the group, we had a discussion about it on the way home. Like if there were things that we wouldn't necessarily say in front of people we don't know very well...We definitely carried the conversation on in private between us.”⁶

Some couples did a session or two on their own at home and found that they missed the group discussion during those sessions. The feedback given in the interviews makes it clear that the group approach was a positive influence on the couples. While this project did not compare the results of a group training against an individual training, it does demonstrate that the group approach was effective.

Views on Mentoring

That the group approach was effective is further demonstrated by the couples’ reflections on how they see themselves as mentors. Seven participant couples came out of the training expressing willingness to mentor (not including this researcher and his wife). The two that have opted not to serve as mentors arrived at their conclusion not because of their initial hesitations but because of a clearer understanding of what it means to be marriage mentors.

4. Appendix D, Couple 2, 100.

5. Appendix D, Couple 3, 104.

6. Appendix D, Couple 7, 117.

One of those who decided not to mentor is a professional counselor. Initially, she went into the training thinking that it would be an opportunity to apply those skills in a less formal setting. However, after the training she reflected that she was concerned about the blurring of lines between her formal role as a counselor and the personal relationship that develops between mentor and mentee. She recognized from the training that being a mentor requires establishing a personal connection.

Two other couples decided after the training to shift the focus of their mentoring from premarital to marriage enrichment. One of them had, at the outset, envisioned mentoring a couple in the premarital phase, or perhaps as newlyweds. After the training, however, they began to worry about how to relate to a much younger couple. “Will they relate to me? Will they take what I say seriously because it was different when we were newlyweds. It was a different time. It was almost twenty-five years ago.”⁷ They shifted their target, hoping instead to focus on couples who have been married for some time and needed either repair or enrichment. Another couple simply said, “Going through the program definitely changed my outlook.”⁸ Their thinking also shifted from premarital mentoring to enrichment mentoring.

The youngest participant couple shared that they saw mentoring as a way to “give back.” “We both had lots of good examples of marriage around us growing up,” they said, “and that helped us when we got married. We really like the idea of being able to give that to another couple who might not have those examples.” They recognized, however, that their lack of experience could be a hurdle. But the training helped them see that it does not have to be.

“I think it opened our eyes to see that you don't have to be perfect to do it. You don't have to have all the experience...just being there for somebody is enough to

7. Appendix D, Couple 1, 99.

8. Appendix D, Couple 2, 102.

make an impact positively on another person's relationship and you can learn along the way, just as you're helping teach you can learn along the way too.”⁹

They valued the broad overview of the training and viewed it only as a starting point.

“I feel like until you start actually mentoring you don't really know where you yourself might need more help. You are kind of getting a broad overview of everything. I feel like it did a pretty good job of going over every single subject and not spending too much time on one thing and not enough on another. And then maybe once you get into mentoring, you'll learn yourself like, oh, I need to learn more about how to help people in this way.”¹⁰

Meanwhile, the oldest participants focused on the value of mentoring for advancing Gospel ministry. “I would feel very comfortable talking to them, you know about Jesus mostly. You know, how to keep him close to you and your marriage. I just feel comfortable talking about that more than anything else, the love of Christ that they have, he has for them.”¹¹ This couple also felt that they would be able to mentor couples coming out of death or divorce, as they themselves had. They saw it as an opportunity to share the power of Christ’s redemption.

Overall, every couple viewed the training as a positive experience, and appreciated that the training was presented in a group format where they could learn from each other. Many also saw areas where the training could be improved.

Future Directions

Recommendations for Improvement

A few couples wanted more from the training. “I felt like it went really fast. I mean it just, it felt like there should have been more... I think it's one of those things where you just have

9. Appendix D, Couple 3, 103.

10. Appendix D, Couple 3, 103.

11. Appendix D, Couple 5, 109.

to, if you want to do it...make some time and do it.”¹² They recognized that schedules and time constraints get in the way, but also wished there could have been more time together to learn and discuss. “I thought that [it] was kind of rushed and I thought there wasn't enough discussion. Spend some time on those answers, even as a couple or around the table.”¹³ One couple suggested incorporating role-playing to extend discussion and application. “I know sometimes it starts off cheesy too, but like some role-playing where you're like...couple says this, you say this kind of thing.”¹⁴

Some couples also desired more training “how to” establish and end the mentoring relationship. One couple asked, “Is this a lifelong thing? And hopefully it turns into a friendship, but if it doesn't, you know, what's the... Is this a six-week thing? Four? Again, being planners, it's the definition of when it starts and ends. It's a little bit... it would be kind of, I don't say [a] concern, but uncertainty.”¹⁵ Another commented,

“That’s where people are gonna have the most trouble. How do you break up with... how do you let them down easy? I mean, how do you approach that thing? It's not working. I mean, it was easy for them to say set boundaries. But again... you can't have that one-size-fits-all thing, you know. So again, what, what does that look like? What does that sound like?”¹⁶

Couples also expressed a desire for more guidance in the “nuts and bolts” of mentoring. During one of the training sessions the couples discussed possibly continuing to meet monthly or quarterly after the training concluded, rather than extending the training program.

12. Appendix D, Couple 1, 99.

13. Appendix D, Couple 4, 105.

14. Appendix D, Couple 4, 105.

15. Appendix D, Couple 6, 114.

16. Appendix D, Couple 4, 107.

One couple was particularly concerned about the lack of biblical direction in the training. They brought it up during one of the training sessions, and again in the closing interview. “If someone's struggling with something, what are the best areas to go to for this struggle or for this struggle or for this struggle? From the God's word side of it.”¹⁷ Other couples agreed. Because they are not trained in ministry and practiced in where to go in God’s Word for specific questions, they were nervous about giving inaccurate or unhelpful guidance.

Based on this feedback from the participant couples, the following suggestions for improvement to the training process are recommended:

1. Include a session near the beginning of the training that reviews the primary biblical texts relating to the doctrine of marriage. In addition, incorporate a short (15 minute) Bible study into each training session. Ideally, couples would come into the training already mature in their understanding of Scripture. But the inclusion of Scripture in the training process would be encouraging and might develop discussion for how to use Scripture to meet specific needs.
2. Develop a mentor-to-mentee onboarding and offboarding process and have it in place before the training begins. Give an overview of the process at the start of the training, and then a walkthrough of the process at the conclusion of the training. This would help couples feel much more confident that they know what the mentoring arrangement will look like.
3. Establish a plan for additional cohort meetings after the conclusion of the training. These may be monthly or quarterly; it might be best to allow each cohort to decide. Regular meetings would extend the relationships and provide opportunities for encouragement

17. Appendix D, Couple 7, 118.

and discussion about specific issues, without making the training process so long that it is difficult for couples to commit.

Recommendations for Further Research

While this thesis-project demonstrates the effectiveness of group cohorts for mentor training, more research is needed on marriage mentoring in general, and specifically how best to train marriage mentors. One direction for research would be to observe mentor couples and their mentees to see what works and what does not. Additional research directions might include:

1. A comparative study between group training and individual training to determine how much more effective group training is than individual training.
2. A qualitative study interviewing active marriage mentors in a variety of settings to learn how they were trained, what they found helpful in their training, and what additional training they would have received.
3. A comparison of case studies between churches that use marriage mentors and those that do not, to help clarify for ministry leaders the advantages and disadvantages of using marriage mentors.

Next steps for Ministry at St. Mark

When this project began, the social media coordinator for St. Mark posted about the effort to train marriage mentors. This prompted some couples in the congregation to reach out, asking how they could connect with one of these mentor couples. It is clear there are opportunities for this kind of ministry at St. Mark.

The couples that participated in the project generated their own ideas for connecting to mentees. They suggested incorporating mentoring into our premarital process. They would attend a premarital seminar with couples seeking marriage at St. Mark during the next year. After the seminar, the mentors would work together to assign mentees for the remainder of the premarital process. The St. Mark pastoral staff had proposed a similar idea, but the participant couples arrived at a more refined version.

They also suggested hosting an annual dinner and inviting any couples in the congregation looking to improve their marriage. At the dinner, the mentor couples would lead discussions about their marriages, the challenges they have faced and how they have overcome those challenges. At the end, they would present the idea of mentoring and invite couples in attendance to fill out a card requesting a mentor. Then the mentors would evaluate and follow up with the mentees.

One more idea they generated was to combine efforts with the annual marriage retreat St. Mark offers. The mentors would attend the retreat and serve as breakout discussion leaders throughout the retreat. At the end, they would compare notes on which couples they felt were the best candidates for mentoring, and then assign mentees to mentor couples from there.

All the ideas generated by the mentor couples are worth pursuing and would fit with the ministry philosophy of St. Mark. They have the added value of buy-in from the mentor couples themselves. The St. Mark pastoral staff has also proposed a twelve-week marriage support program that combines large group and small group discussion, where small group discussions are led by lay couples. The mentor couples would be an obvious source for small group leaders.

Final Thoughts

At the time of this writing, this researcher has two couples in crisis counseling, one couple in recovery, and five couples in premarital counseling. In a 2022 survey conducted at St.

Mark, more than fifty survey respondents indicated that help with their marriage is one of their top five spiritual concerns. A sermon this researcher preached in September of this year on the topic of marriage is currently the second-most downloaded sermon podcast on the St. Mark website. Marriage ministry is a need and a desire at St. Mark, and in the surrounding community.

Marriage mentoring is one way to meet that need, and it certainly would help alleviate some of the counseling load. But it does more than just meet a need. It is an opportunity for couples to make a mission out of their marriage, giving them purpose and direction for their service. It is a vision that stands against the common notions of our culture that marriage is about personal happiness and fulfillment. When a couple sees their marriage as an opportunity to serve others, it becomes less self-focused and more other-focused. The same could be said for any mentoring ministry, such as mentoring for congregational leadership, for men's or women's ministries, or for youth ministry. Group training cohorts would be a beneficial approach for any direction mentoring would take. It brings God's people together and builds relationships and community. This will always be a worthwhile effort.

APPENDIX A: Training Schedule

Session	Video	Discussion	At Home
1	Preliminaries (9 minutes)	<p>Introductions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give us the 5 minute version of how you met and how you decided you were right for each other. • Tell us about a memorable date or trip you took together and why it stands out. • When you think about the idea of “Marriage Mentoring” – what comes to mind? What makes you concerned and what makes you confident? 	Page through your journal and take note of the suggestions on page 2.
2	The Big Picture (15 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you have defined Marriage Mentoring coming into this week? How would you define it now? • Who have been some mentors (or potential mentors) in your life? What made them special? 	Work through your journal pages 3-9
	Building Rapport and Walking in Another Couple’s Shoes (21 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking at the list of qualities on page 8 of your journal, what are two that you would like to cultivate in yourself? What are some steps you would take to do so? • Read the Bible passages on page 9 of your journal. What stands out to you? 	
3	Working as a Team and Agreeing on Outcomes (24 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are some gender stereotypes that you tend not to agree with? What are some you find to be true? • How would you avoid making assumptions when talking with a couple you are mentoring? 	Work through your journal pages 10-12
4	Asking Meaningful Questions and Listening Aggressively (18 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Come up with an example of an “unmeaningful” question, and then have your spouse turn it into a meaningful question. • How might you plan meaningful questions ahead of time? 	Work through your journal pages 13-17
	Fielding Questions and Telling Your Stories (21 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When is it a good idea to share about your own struggles and tell your own story? What are some situations where it is best not to? 	
5	Praying Together and Staying Sharp (17 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How comfortable are you praying in front of others? If it is difficult, what makes it difficult? If not difficult, what has helped you gain confidence? • Is there a guide for prayer that you have found specifically helpful? 	Work through your journal

	Being Yourself and Spotting Red Flags (18 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the difference between “fitting in” and “belonging?” • Think of the times when you feel like you can totally be yourself. What makes you comfortable being authentic in those moments? • Work with your spouse to come up with one question you could ask a couple you’re mentoring to get them to be more authentic. 	pages 18-23
6	Next Steps (7 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has your thinking about marriage mentoring changed over the last several weeks? • Every mentor is different. Where do you see yourself being most strong in the mentoring process? (Thinking especially about those three areas – Maximizing, Preparing and Repairing). 	Work through your journal pages 24-25

APPENDIX B: Questionnaires

Pre-Training Questionnaire

Completed between April 6 and 16, 2023.

Section 1: Instructions

This questionnaire has five sections.

This is section 1 - it is short.

Sections 2-4 each have 9 statements, and you will be asked to rate your agreement to those statements on a 4-point scale.

Section 5 gives you space for comments and asks two simple demographic questions. (Note: these questions are only for data classification.)

You and your spouse should each complete the questionnaire. I would advise doing so separately if possible. This should take about 5-15 minutes to complete.

Brief explanation for purposes of the research study:

This questionnaire is designed to explore your understanding of marriage from a biblical perspective as well as your confidence for marriage mentoring and your openness to authenticity. The information you provide will be helpful for studying the effectiveness of marriage mentor training in a group setting. This study is being conducted by Brandon Steenbock, Family Minister at St. Mark Ministries, De Pere, WI. Please be assured that all of your answers will be kept strictly confidential. The information that you provide will be presented only in summary form, in combination with the responses of other participants in this study. The answers that you give will never be linked with your name. By completing this questionnaire, you have given your consent that you are a voluntary participant in this study.

Participant Identification:

Please enter a 4-digit number of your choosing. Important: Please write down that number and keep it in a safe place - you will use that number again for the post-training questionnaire. This will keep your responses anonymous while also allowing me to compare your responses from both questionnaires. Also important: Please do not use the same number as your spouse (for example, do not use your house number if you think your spouse would also use your house number).

Section 2: Understanding of Marriage (Rated on a 4-point scale from Disagree to Agree)

1. God is the author of marriage and he defines its meaning and purpose.
2. God ordained marriage at creation and set the pattern for marriage for all people of all time.
3. Marriage is defined as the lifelong union of a man and a woman.
4. The foundation of a marriage is the commitment made between two people.
5. Marriage is a reflection of the love between Christ and the Church: Husbands are to love like Jesus, wives are to submit like the Church.
6. Marriage is intended to be permanent; divorce is only permitted in cases of unfaithfulness, abandonment or abuse.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Couples should live separately prior to marriage. 8. Couples should abstain from sex prior to marriage. 9. Couples should view marriage as a commitment and responsibility, even if they feel they have fallen out of love.
Section 3: Confidence for Mentoring (Rated on a 4-point scale from Disagree to Agree)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I am intentional about growing in my faith and knowledge through regular study of God's Word. 2. I regularly seek to improve myself as a spouse and make my marriage the best it can be. 3. I feel confident in my ability to explain what the Bible teaches about marriage. 4. I believe I can be a good listener and hear another person's story. 5. I would feel comfortable building rapport with another couple as I mentor them. 6. I understand what a strong marriage requires and feel confident leading another couple toward growth. 7. I believe I would be able to answer difficult questions another couple might ask, or point them to someone who can. 8. I would recognize potential red flags for another couple and boldly and lovingly confront them. 9. Overall, I am confident that I can be a marriage mentor to another couple.
Section 4: Openness to Authenticity (Rated on a 4-point scale from Disagree to Agree)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I believe I understand what is most important in my life and marriage. 2. I enjoy getting to know other people and sharing about my own life and viewpoints. 3. I feel comfortable sharing my story and being transparent about my struggles. 4. I am able to be open about my failures and how I have worked to resolve them. 5. I feel comfortable praying with and for another person in their presence. 6. I believe I can be myself, even with people I don't know well. 7. I am able to confront another believer's sin with truth and grace. 8. I am able to share God's grace with another believer and how it has impacted my life. 9. Overall, I am comfortable being transparent and authentic as a marriage mentor to another couple.
Section 5: Comments and Demographics
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Comments – please share any additional comments relating to your understanding of biblical marriage, your confidence with being a marriage mentor, or your comfort with openness and authenticity. 2. Your gender (Male or Female) 3. How many years have you been married? (Ranges given)

Post-Training Questionnaire

Completed between June 4 and 24, 2023

Section 1: Instructions

This is a slightly modified version of the Pre-Training questionnaire.

This questionnaire has five sections.

This is section 1 - it is short.

Sections 2-4 each have 9 statements, and you will be asked to rate your agreement to those statements on a 4-point scale.

Section 5 gives you space for comments and asks two simple demographic questions. (Note: these questions are only for data classification.)

You and your spouse should each complete the questionnaire. I would advise doing so separately if possible. This should take about 5-15 minutes to complete.

Brief explanation for purposes of the research study:

This questionnaire is designed to explore your understanding of marriage from a biblical perspective as well as your confidence for marriage mentoring and your openness to authenticity. The information you provide will be helpful for studying the effectiveness of marriage mentor training in a group setting. This study is being conducted by Brandon Steenbock, Family Minister at St. Mark Ministries, De Pere, WI. Please be assured that all of your answers will be kept strictly confidential. The information that you provide will be presented only in summary form, in combination with the responses of other participants in this study. The answers that you give will never be linked with your name. By completing this questionnaire, you have given your consent that you are a voluntary participant in this study.

Participant Identification:

Please enter the same 4-digit number you used for the Pre-Training Questionnaire.

Were you able to attend all the training sessions in person? (Yes or No)

Did you go through all the training sessions, whether in person or on your own at home? (Yes or No)

Section 2: Understanding of Marriage (Rated on a 4-point scale from Disagree to Agree)

1. God is the author of marriage and he defines its meaning and purpose.
2. God ordained marriage at creation and set the pattern for marriage for all people of all time.
3. Marriage is defined as the lifelong union of a man and a woman.
4. The foundation of a marriage is the commitment made between two people.
5. Marriage is a reflection of the love between Christ and the Church: Husbands are to love like Jesus, wives are to submit like the Church.
6. Marriage is intended to be permanent; divorce is only permitted in cases of unfaithfulness, abandonment or abuse.
7. Couples should live separately prior to marriage.
8. Couples should abstain from sex prior to marriage.

9. Couples should view marriage as a commitment and responsibility, even if they feel they have fallen out of love.
Section 3: Confidence for Mentoring (Rated on a 4-point scale from Disagree to Agree)
1. I am intentional about growing in my faith and knowledge through regular study of God's Word.
2. I regularly seek to improve myself as a spouse and make my marriage the best it can be.
3. I feel confident in my ability to explain what the Bible teaches about marriage.
4. I believe I can be a good listener and hear another person's story.
5. I would feel comfortable building rapport with another couple as I mentor them.
6. I understand what a strong marriage requires and feel confident leading another couple toward growth.
7. I believe I would be able to answer difficult questions another couple might ask, or point them to someone who can.
8. I would recognize potential red flags for another couple and boldly and lovingly confront them.
9. Overall, I am confident that I can be a marriage mentor to another couple.
Section 4: Openness to Authenticity (Rated on a 4-point scale from Disagree to Agree)
1. I believe I understand what is most important in my life and marriage.
2. I enjoy getting to know other people and sharing about my own life and viewpoints.
3. I feel comfortable sharing my story and being transparent about my struggles.
4. I am able to be open about my failures and how I have worked to resolve them.
5. I feel comfortable praying with and for another person in their presence.
6. I believe I can be myself, even with people I don't know well.
7. I am able to confront another believer's sin with truth and grace.
8. I am able to share God's grace with another believer and how it has impacted my life.
9. Overall, I am comfortable being transparent and authentic as a marriage mentor to another couple.
Section 5: Comments and Demographics
1. In a few sentences, please describe how your understanding of marriage mentoring grew over the course of the training.
2. Comments – please share any additional comments relating to your understanding of biblical marriage, your confidence with being a marriage mentor, or your comfort with openness and authenticity.
3. Your gender (Male or Female)
4. How many years have you been married? (Ranges given)

APPENDIX C: Interview Questions

1. What did you like best or find most helpful about the training? What did you find least helpful or dislike about the training?
2. How did you feel about the group setting for the training? What were the positives or negatives?
3. What are one or two specific changes you think we could make to make the group training more effective or enjoyable?
4. Do you feel more confident or comfortable with the role of marriage mentor than you were prior to the training? Please add any explanation needed.
5. Finally, do you see yourself being comfortable serving as a marriage mentor couple in the future, and if so, do you have any specific vision for what kind of mentoring you would like to do? (i.e., preparing new couples for marriage, helping established couples maximize their relationship, helping couples in crisis to repair)

APPENDIX D: Transcripts

Seven couples opted to participate in feedback interviews after the training concluded. Interviews took place between June 4 and June 15, 2023. The interviews were recorded at the consent of the couples. The following transcripts have been edited slightly to eliminate verbal pauses and repeated words and phrases, while still maintaining the personality of the speakers. Some sections are redacted when they reference people or ministry activities specific to St. Mark Ministries.

Couple 1

25+ years of marriage

Age early 50s

Transcript

Interviewer: We're going to be recording this. Are you OK being recorded? Yes. Awesome. Thank you very much. All right, so we did this training and you guys were able to attend most of the sessions, right?

Husband: About half, about 50%.

Wife: Something like that.

Interviewer: 50% or so. OK. Were you able to do the sessions that you weren't there in person for? Were you able to do those online?

Wife: Yes, we were.

Interviewer: Very good.

Husband: And personally speaking too, I don't know if it's going to be part of this, but I think we actually got maybe a little bit more out of it because we were able to take it and do those pauses for the recordings and have discussions versus when we were in person, read through the whole thing and had a discussion. And for me it was, it felt more... disjointed.

Wife: I liked doing a combination as well because it was nice to hear other people's perspectives and what their thoughts were and what their comments were and you know you leading it and things like that too. But it was kind of neat to do some of them on our own. And just like the conversations that we had as a result of it, I think we're really important too. And yeah, like we went to, we don't have those conversations when we're in the big group.

Interviewer: So the first question you kind of already answered a little bit, but what did you find most helpful or did you like best about the training in general?

Wife: I like the questions that are posed to us because like I said, it did spur conversations that we probably wouldn't have otherwise had, I think. Plus, it gave us an opportunity, I think on the flip side coming here, it gave us an opportunity to interact with people that I haven't interacted with before. Some of them we have but not others. Everybody, most people were pretty, familiar at least, but I haven't had conversations with them before. So that was kind of nice.

Husband: We knew half of the couples. But for the most part, we just see faces and it's good to hear their perspective and how many years they've been married and, you know the span.

Wife: Yeah, I think that first week going through that was probably my favorite. I mean, just learning everybody's story and like how they met and everything was just very fascinating to me. So our daughter, our oldest daughter, had just recently gone through a breakup, and it was her first boyfriend. And they were together for a pretty long time. So, you know, she took it very

seriously, so then she's just feeling like, I thought he was my person, and he's not my person. And then we have that meeting with them, like not too long after that. And it was, I really needed to hear this, like God has a plan, you know. I knew she was gonna be fine. But I mean, just to be able to share some of that with her too, I think was helpful. Like God has a plan.

Interviewer: That's a cool way that the opportunity to go through this training led to its own ministry opportunity without the intention. That's cool. Thanks for sharing that.

Husband: Yeah, I think if we wouldn't have gone through this and somebody would have said, hey, we're going to start a marriage mentoring program? I don't know I would have been like, sign me up. I mean, that sounds like a great idea. Go for it. But...

Interviewer: You mentioned before that you found the group setting was good in some ways, but doing it on your own was good as well. Do you have any other thoughts about the group setting?

Wife: I think it's like more accountability, I mean, you know you show up because other people are showing up and it's good to have an interaction. And I liked the variety of perspectives that we had there too. I wasn't really sure what it was going to be like, was it going to be everybody kind of close to being married as long as we have or our age or whatever the case may be. But there was, there was the whole gamut there which I thought helped and gave me a really interesting perspective. Because everybody was at a different spot and had different experiences.

Husband: I totally agree with that too. I'm just getting other people's perspectives and just also understanding the dynamic of some of the couples and who does a lot of the talking and who doesn't. I do lot of analysis self, self-analysis, and it's very interesting.

Interviewer: What would be one or two specific things that you would change about that process to make it more effective or enjoyable?

Husband: I think like I said when we did it on our own, we paused. So we went through it and we paused and we made a really concerted effort to make sure that we filled out the questions or whatever they asked. And then we had a conversation about what we each wrote down before we moved on. I got a lot out of that. So I thought that was a big deal.

Wife: I didn't love the videos. I mean, it just felt so... dated. And I'm sure, I think that's part of the problem. I mean the message is fine. The message itself was fine. I struggled a little bit with the couple even the mentor couples and mentee couples.

Husband: We would talk and like there's this one couple where like for the first few sessions where it was the guy and was he was talking and talking and talking and the gal never said anything. And one time I said something to Heather and then now she's watching when it comes to this couple, where he's always talking and she never says anything. She's always looking at him. And I'm like, does she talk? And finally, there was another session where she said something. I'm like, well, she does talk.

Interviewer: That's very helpful, because one of the results of this will be actually passed on to the creators of the mentor training.

Wife: I think some of the resources sounded interesting too. And this could be completely wrong on my part, but I just I feel like sometimes it seems bad, like they're totally capitalizing on this, right? Like now I'm gonna sell you a book. Like when you do this, when you mentor you need to read this book. It just feels weird, just like, but it's not wrong. Everybody has to make a living and it's something that I'm sure that they have, very good intention. It just seemed like, what else can we sell?

Husband: You do need some basis to help you, otherwise somebody else is making up the content.

Interviewer: You're right, and this is a common thread in a lot of marriage ministries. They have their brand and they have all the same tools as the other guy. But it's their brand and they're going to market it. Like you said, sometimes it is just that they have to make a living. But maybe as a church we can find a way to share so we're not duplicating as much. That's a good thought.

Interviewer: Do you feel that after going through the training you feel more confident or comfortable with the idea of being marriage mentors?

Husband: Yeah, we talked about it and we certainly do. If the opportunity presented itself, I think we would.

Wife: Yeah, I do. Sure, yeah.

Interviewer: When you think about those 3 dimensions: Repair, Prepare, and Maximize, was there one that you gravitate towards?

Wife: Yeah, I think we said the maximize is probably the one that we felt like the most comfortable with. I would say in the beginning I was maybe thinking more about preparing, like couples that are just newly married or getting ready to get married. But then I worry that...

Husband: We're old. We appear really young. But we're old.

Wife: I'm old, right? Will they relate to me? Will they take what I say seriously because it was different when we were newlyweds. It was a different time. It was almost 25 years ago.

Interviewer: That's fair. On the other hand, I think there are some young couples today who desperately need more than anything else somebody who has experience. It's not just somebody they can relate to, but somebody who is from a different time and can say, maybe you've lost sight of something. There are some couples I know who long for that. They've expressed that. So it could be either way, but it's good to know where you guys are as far as what you think would be a good area of service for you as a couple.

Interviewer: Anything else in general or specific to this training that you would like to mention that we haven't touched on already?

Husband: I felt like it went really fast. I mean it just it felt like there were should have been more.

Interviewer: More training sessions?

Husband: Like we should have been doing something else and it just went really fast. Or maybe time is just quite fast for us anyway.

Wife: I have to add, I think that if you had said at the outset, hey, this is gonna be 12 weeks, it would have been more difficult for us to say yes.

Interviewer: So a longer program you would have been less likely to agree to?

Husband: I think it's one of those things where you just have to, if you want to do it, you make some time and do it.

Wife: And knowing that you had the flexibility, if you can't attend this one and you go through the material on your own. Having that flexibility made it very doable in my mind. So if that wasn't the case, I think it would have been difficult because how are you going to get that many people to have the same schedule? It's not going to happen..

Interviewer: Well, thanks very much for being a part of the training. Thanks for participating and thanks for giving me a few minutes to pick your brain and get your feedback.

Couple 2

25+ years of marriage

Age early 60s

Transcript

Interviewer: We're going to begin. Do you consent to having your interview be recorded?

Wife: Yes.

Husband: Yes.

Interviewer: Yes, excellent. All right, let's get started then. You guys were able to participate in several of the sessions. In general, what did you like best or find most helpful about the mentor training program?

Wife: I think it made us sort of maybe think about our own marriage more and maybe things that have changed within our marriage or things that have improved with our marriage over the years.

Husband: I found, yeah, found out a little bit more about my wife that I didn't know before, and I think I found out more faults about myself, you know that that I need to improve on.

Interviewer: So it forced introspection and a little bit of personal growth?

Husband: Yeah, definitely.

Interviewer: OK. Anything else that you appreciated or enjoyed about the training process?

Wife: I really liked our first session where we got to know some of the other couples and I think just that in and of itself helped alleviate some of the, Am I qualified to do this? My feelings? Because it's like I think all of us admitted that, you know, we've had... There are no perfect marriages, but you just kind of... You realize that, but for everybody to be like, yeah, we've had some struggles and you know, sometimes there have been issues, but we've worked through them. And I think that was just a really helpful way, for me anyway, I felt that was really neat. And just even to find out a little bit about their life story. And I think later on in the training it even talked about, you know, maybe that being a good way to start a mentoring session. How did you guys meet? Or you know what do you guys like to do together? I mean, you know, just hearing what some of the couples have done, like, for trips or what they want to do or things like that. I think it's a good icebreaker and just, you know, like I said, a good way to get to know other people.

Husband: Yeah, I can consider ourselves newer members here. So we enjoy meeting new people, you know. It was nice just talking with the people, knowing you know what, what their life was a little bit about.

Interviewer: So how did you feel about the training in a group setting?

Wife: There were things I liked about the group setting. There were also things I liked about doing a number of them online because of our vacations and then...

Husband: You did?

Wife: Yeah, I did.

Husband: Yeah, I did too.

Wife: You know, missing some other sessions. The group thing is nice because you kind of hear other people's ideas and sometimes it kind of reaffirmed what you were thinking, but then there were like, Oh yeah, that's a good point. Especially like that one session where we talked about meaningful questions. I felt I knew, but I took a lot of notes on that one. I thought some people had a lot of really good ideas and suggestions on that one. So I think that was helpful. The ones we did online at home I thought was nice. We could actually, as we're going through it, like, stop

the tape, fill out our section, talk about a little bit, and then go on. Whereas like in the group setting, you know you kind of had to do some of that after the fact or before the fact.

Interviewer: You appreciated the ability to take it more at your own pace and not be dictated by the schedule?

Wife: Yes, that type of thing. And I think it enabled us to discuss each other's ideas, you know because sometimes there'd be questions. Like, what do you think your spouse would...? And like, he would give me answers. You're not going to necessarily do that in a group session.

Husband: Yeah, yeah, sure.

Wife: Or we might find that, yeah, we both agree on that, so I think that was helpful too. And I guess I really liked some of both.

Husband: Right. And well, I just think we got to talk more to each other at our kitchen table than what we probably did in years, you know, and we found out a little bit more just reviewing our marriage. That was good.

Interviewer: What are one or two specific changes you think we could make to help the group training be more effective or enjoyable?

Wife: One thing that I think would be helpful would be to maybe in certain spots, break it into, Let's have the six of you go in this room and go through this section. I think some of the sessions tended to be maybe be dominated, maybe by one or a handful of people. And I think some people just feel more open to discussing or volunteering...

Husband: In a smaller setting. Yeah.

Wife: Yeah. And maybe even splitting couples apart for some things, just because... I tend to be more of the blabbermouth and you know, like my husband sometimes maybe doesn't get the chance to talk or if I'm not in the room, he might talk more.

Husband: Okay, maybe I suppose.

Interviewer: So maybe smaller groups for certain parts or certain lessons?

Wife: I think that would be just kind of a fun way to break it up a little, I guess.

Husband: Sure. Yeah. That's about the only thing I can say too is exactly what she said about splitting people like that. I really can't think of anything that you know. I think the program was very I think helpful.

Wife: I thought that the training, all in all had some really valuable points.

Husband: Right, and some things you never think of.

Interviewer: Do you feel more confident or comfortable with the idea of being marriage mentors as a couple after going through the training?

Husband: Yeah, definitely.

Wife: Yes, and I think I put that on the questionnaire. I liked the point about storytelling. I know like from trainings I went through in my job, it's like, Don't over share your own personal experiences, but it's hard not to do that. But this is about the mentees, so, you know, a story here and there is fine, but you don't want to overdo that. I thought that was really... there's a lot of good information there.

Interviewer: When it came to those 3 categories in the training, Repairing, Preparing, and Maximizing: do you feel that you are more comfortable with one of those areas?

Husband: I thought they were pretty much equal. I mean that really. And I believe we could do any of them.

Wife: It's kind of funny because before the training I thought the repairing part I wouldn't want. I felt like maybe least interested in that, but I think after going through the training, I feel like any one of those parts would be good.

Husband: Yeah, my numbers changed from the beginning to the end too.

Interviewer: Would you be willing to share in what way they changed?

Husband: Well, I had preparing almost 50% and I think, and repairing 50%. Or no, maybe preparing 50%, repairing 40%, and maximizing 10%. But now I think it's more balanced. So going through the program definitely changed my outlook.

Interviewer: The training gave you a different perspective on those other areas and how you would approach mentoring different situations?

Husband: Right, exactly. Exactly. Yeah.

Interviewer: Overall, is there anything else that you wanted to reflect on or thoughts that you had about the training that you'd like to share?

Wife: I don't really. Like I said I thought the way they had it laid out was good. I did like hearing from people who are actually... hearing from a variety of people who actually mentor. Although the ones we were doing by ourselves at the end, I was just like, oh not another one, you know? So I liked it, but then it got kind of old.

Interviewer: So perhaps the training materials themselves could be adapted to have a little bit less of the personal testimonies, is that what you're saying?

Wife: Or, you know, just a little more variety with it, like maybe more in some of the initial sessions and maybe less of that, I don't know. And maybe that was just me and any given day, you know, you're going to feel differently.

Husband: I agree with what she says. I guess you're not going to know until you actually do it what to expect. So those testimonies helped to paint a picture. But once you know...

Wife: I think one of the things... the Sunday afternoons ended up being a really tough time for us and I think that's just because of our family dynamics right now with two grown single kids who on weekends. But I know how it is. You're never going to find an ideal time or date or day of the week for people.

Husband: Yeah. Since we've retired, our times have just totally went backwards. We have plenty of time on a weekday, like a Tuesday. But just Saturday and Sunday, they're so busy. But, it could be difficult to line up schedules for everybody.

Interviewer: Thank you for giving me this feedback and this time.

Couple 3

2 years of marriage

Age mid 20s

Transcript

Interviewer: All right. So we're going to be recording this. Are you guys OK being recorded?

Wife: Yes.

Husband: Yes.

Interviewer: Yes, all right. Very good. So you guys attended most of the in person sessions, you had to do a little bit online. Were you able to complete the ones you weren't there in person for?

Husband: Yeah, that worked.

Interviewer: Okay overall, what did you find most helpful or what did you like best about the training?

Wife: We were just saying on the right here that we liked working in a group. It's just nice hearing other people's perspectives and thoughts on things. So that's helpful as opposed to just being the two of us.

Husband: Yeah. Doing it on our own, the times that we had to do it on our own, I feel like we didn't get as much out of it as we would have doing it in a group. I feel like doing it in a group setting you hear a lot of different opinions and a lot of different viewpoints on the same thing. So it can help, you know, help you learn more and see more about certain subjects.

Interviewer: So you felt that the group setting was more beneficial than doing it on your own at home?

Husband: Yeah, I would say we for sure felt that way.

Interviewer: Apart from people's other perspectives, were there other things about the group setting that you found helpful?

Husband: I feel like it forced you to take more time to look at this stuff because like we are here for X amount of time. There's a certain time block that you have. If you're doing it on your own at home, you're kind of up to whatever's happening. And oh, we didn't get to it in time. So how much time are we going to spend on it? You know, like you're kind of forced to spend more time doing it and kind of getting more in depth into subjects.

Wife: Yeah, not as many distractions. I feel like physically going to a place and sitting with people you feel like you're into it a bit more.

Husband: Very intentional.

Wife: So that's nice.

Interviewer: Are there one or two changes that you would recommend that would make it more effective or more enjoyable?

Husband: I don't think there's too much I would change about it, honestly. Maybe some snacks.

Wife: I don't know.

Husband: I think it went pretty good. I liked how we how we did it too, you know, with the watching the video but not spending just the time focused on the video but getting into other things more in depth with not just the stuff in the worksheet.

Wife: Yeah, I think the structure works pretty well.

Interviewer: Having done the training do you feel more comfortable or confident about the idea of being a marriage mentor couple in the future?

Husband: Yeah, I think so. I think it opened our eyes to see that you don't have to be perfect to do it. You don't have to have all the experience. Helping people is like... just being there for somebody is enough to make an impact positively on another person's relationship and you can learn along the way, just as you're helping teach you can learn along the way too.

Wife: And I like how in the videos and the courses it brings up stuff that like that can be going on with the couples like signs to be aware of and stuff like that. I think it has a lot of helpful tools to kind of prepare you that you might not have thought about before. So I think that's really helpful.

Interviewer: As far as additional tools, are there things that you feel would be nice to have or certain areas that you wish we would have spent more time on?

Husband: Not really, because I feel like until you start actually mentoring you don't really know where you yourself might need more help kind of getting a broad overview of everything. I feel like it did a pretty good job of going over every single subject and not spending too much time on one thing and not enough on another. And then maybe once you get into mentoring, you'll learn yourself like, oh, I need to learn more about how to help people in this way. And having the

group setting and being able to go back to the people that you were in the group with is beneficial because maybe they have more experience than that and you can kind of work together to be as good as possible.

Interviewer: When you think about those three different dimensions in the training: Preparing, Repairing, and Maximizing, is there one of those that you would see yourselves as a mentor couple gravitating more towards?

Wife: Probably preparing since we were in that same spot not too long ago and it's fresher in our minds, I feel like.

Interviewer: Overall, anything else that I haven't asked about that you would like to share?

Husband: No, not really.

Wife: Nope.

Interviewer: Okay, well thank you for participating and for taking time for a few questions.

Couple 4

15-20 years of marriage

Age early 40s

Transcript

Interviewer: This is going to be recorded. Do you consent to being recorded?

Husband: Yes.

Wife: Yep.

Interviewer: Yes. All right. Thank you. Thinking in general about the training, what did you like best or find most helpful about the training overall?

Wife: I like that it was in a group setting and that we could bounce ideas off of other couples because I thought there was some really insightful ideas from... especially like the age difference and newly married couples and longtime married couples, older couples who haven't been married a long time.

Husband: That's true. I mean the makeup of the class was really cool and that was very useful. And the other thing too, I mean, there was just enough structure within the lessons that it drove some pretty good conversation. Like the pyramid, right where it was...

Wife: Maximize, yeah.

Husband: Prepare, maximize, repair. I thought that led to some really good conversation because it was almost like we are being taught to do what you know. It's like mentoring - that's a pretty big deal. But then breaking it out and then understanding, OK, you're not going to be a Jack of all trades here. You know, there's going to probably be, you know, some give and take and you're not going to just get placed with somebody that you don't feel you can help. Or don't, honestly, don't want to help. But like, this really isn't going to be your thing as far as your strengths. But I thought especially the last couple of sessions that led to some really good, like, OK, how are we... how is this going to look at this church going forward, you know. So I think that group, I think was probably about as good a group as you could have gotten. And it would have gone well, probably even without, you know, the structured lessons and stuff, because I think you know, you might have been able to, you would have been able to bring up enough things to just say, Hey, look, what do we think about this? Smart Group, good group.

Interviewer: So you felt that the group that was assembled was beneficial?

Husband: Definitely.

Interviewer: Did you have to do any of the lessons on your own, not in the group setting?

Wife: One of us missed once each.

Husband: Yeah, that's right.

Wife: Like there was like 3 weeks in a row where we weren't both there, so then the opposite one did it on their own, but we didn't, like, watch the video together at home, or anything, right?

Husband: Right. But I mean, I did take a lot of the notes, even that first time you said, Hey this is what we went through. Back when I didn't even have my own book, but I was writing on something else. But yeah, we still both went through all the stuff.

Interviewer: So you said that you appreciated the group setting for the diversity of inputs. Were there other things you felt the group setting contributed to that process?

Husband: Probably not more than we've already talked about, like it would have been really hard to do this, just like, you know, with like one or two couples. I mean that would be rough on you, that would have been rough on the couples. I mean, just for, for from just the scale standpoint, I think it was... this is the better, the best way to do it.

Interviewer: If you were to make one or two specific changes to how we approached it to make it better, more enjoyable, more effective, what would you suggest?

Husband: I thought, as we were supposed to be answering questions during the videos, I thought that was kind of rushed and I thought there wasn't enough discussion. Spend some time on those answers, even as a couple or around the table. And again, I know you felt you wanted to kind of get us, you know, like an hour and a half or whatever each time. But I thought that probably might have been a missed opportunity, you know, like do we have to watch the video to get to this answer, or can we discuss this question just based on what we already know, what we've already seen. I thought, oh boy, that might have brought out some better discussion. And I think some people brought it up like after the fact. Like, hey, can you go back to this? But just... you might have been able to tease some things out rather than, Alright, we're going to go back to the video.

Wife: I know sometimes it starts off cheesy too, but like some role-playing where you're like... and I know it's not supposed to be like when you're actually mentoring. Couple says this. You see this kind of thing. You know where you're trying to develop a more authentic relationship with them. But just like when we're talking about the red flag section too, just a little role-playing like... if you were out at dinner and the other couple dropped, you know this truth bomb on you. How would you react in real time?

Interviewer: So, for one, taking advantage of those video activities, and two, some role-playing. Any other thoughts that may have made it more effective?

Husband: I don't know. It seemed that the people came prepared. So that's a good thing. I guess that would have been one worry I had was like, Are people going to actually do this? Because I think that might have been something that we talked about, like follow through. What's it going to look like? Do we have like a couple of really good sessions and then like, nobody shows up because we're getting into summer? But I never thought that it was like, oh man, there's not enough people here to make this feel like it's worth it. But that that could have happened. I mean with a different group or with different timing, it could have fallen apart before you even got to what, 7 or 8 weeks?

Interviewer: After going through the training, do you feel more comfortable, confident with the idea of being a marriage mentor couple?

Wife: I felt less confident as we went along. Like the more I learned about it, I was like, maybe I'm not cut out for this.

Husband: And we talked about that.

Wife: At the beginning, it sounded like a really good idea. Like, Oh yeah, like take a couple under wing, you know, whatever. And then it's like, not even just the red flag section. You know, just like how much of a time commitment is it going to be? Is it going to be in our house is going to somewhere else just like all the little logistics that I hadn't really thought about? Because I'm not usually like a big picture thinker like that, I'm usually more caught up in the little things. And then all of a sudden all these little things, you know, they'd fall into place once you get into it, but I kind of felt more overwhelmed as we went along. There's these three things that we have to choose, which one we're working on and if it's two meshed together.

Husband: Yeah, well, and the one thing I actually thought, OK, I feel more confident about it. But you know the one thing - and this is something that you mentioned that I would have probably mentioned to you as well - it would be really hard sometimes to say, You people, listen to yourselves. Apply a little bit of common sense, you know.

Wife: Yeah, we both agreed we might be a little harsh with people whose quote-unquote problems. You know what I mean? Like their issues seem like... We just had a basic life, so you know if it wasn't something we had gone through and we could like see the basic solution. And so I'd have to fight that urge.

Husband: And maybe it would be, I wouldn't have to fight the urge if it was somebody I didn't know. You know I wouldn't be like, what is wrong? I mean, think about what you're doing here. Why are you even here kind of thing. But I'm hoping it wouldn't, you know, get to that. But then again, I think that that sometimes that's going to be a need for a lot of these people. They're looking for help and have maybe very little concept of like what they should have done and maybe talk about these things as a couple. And I get there's a lot of couples that don't talk to others, or never had a good example, right? So that's the kind of thing that I'm like, OK, you don't want to come down on people. But it's just like, the videos made it sound like there's always just like this linear process, but I would imagine that there were there would be times where those people are just shaking their heads. And I would have appreciated hearing that, like OK, what happens when you just feel like you've heard this 10 times from the same couple like, what do you do? You know, like, let's talk about something a little harder, like the role-playing for the red flags. Like, let's hear what that might actually sound like. You know, cuz the red flag discussion that was part of the video was very like, obvious. If they talk about hurting each other, usually that's probably that's not something that's going to be asking for mentorship for one. And it's not gonna be that obvious, right? So where's that balance in there? And what do you do when the conversation stops because you're... you can't just stomp of the room and say, I'm done with you people. You haven't listened to me. I mean, you don't want to take it personally.

Interviewer: So what I'm hearing you say is that maybe the lack of discussion about how you have the harder conversations make it feel more intimidating. You were wondering how to deal with those kinds of situations?

Husband: What's something that's frozen all of those mentor couples completely in their tracks. And I get it. This is just like an overview kind of video, but I mean that's the kind of stuff that I think people are going to really need to know. I mean, yeah, I can love them. And tell them that Christ loves them. But at some point, you know, you got to be able to answer them constructively and not go, I can't believe I'm watching... What are we even doing here? Because that doesn't help.

Interviewer: You also said that you were concerned about the logistics, that maybe it feels a little more overwhelming.

Wife: I know there was one week when we talked about how you can set a time frame, you know, like we're going to be with you once a month for six months and then reevaluate things, and so that that made me feel a little bit better. Or feel a little better about the process, but it just sort of felt like, almost like you were forcing yourself into, like, a lifetime friendship with this couple and like, what if it's a mismatch? And then you don't know how to break up with them if you need to?

Interviewer: So you feel maybe if there was a part of the training that was a discussion of how to set good boundaries and also how to onboard and offboard, that might make you feel more comfortable?

Wife: Yeah, unless it was in there and I missed it.

Interviewer: No, there wasn't. And that's important here because part of the process is evaluating this program itself as well as evaluating how well it works in a group setting. So there could be some value in maybe those additional structural things that could be something that we at St. Mark could develop.

Husband: That's where people are gonna have the most trouble. How do you break up with... how do you let them down easy? I mean, how do you approach that thing? It's not working. I mean, it was easy them to say set boundaries. But again, that's not... You can't have that one-size-fits-all thing, you know. So again, what, what does that look like? What does that sound like? And that's going to be different for each person. But I think again, more examples of, like, if you hear this, this might be a sign that maybe it's not a red flag, maybe a sign that you know the relationship's not working like it should be, or whatever.

Interviewer: If you were to serve as a mentor couple in the future, was there one of those three dimensions: Maximizing, Preparing, or Repairing that you guys gravitated more towards?

Wife: I think we both have Maximizing as the highest one.

Husband: Yeah, I think so too.

Wife: And the other two like equally low. It was like 15-15 maybe.

Husband: I was like, you know, 60, 20, 20 or something like that or 60, 25, 25 I mean. And I think too it's just a function of these people have it, you know they're doing well. I think too, you're kind of leaving out people that might be doing really well, but could be doing a little more, you know, because it's not always about a problem case or somebody that's brand new, you know. Like regular midterm married folks have the same opportunities and might just need that brought out. That sounded really cool.

Interviewer: Anything else overall about the training that I haven't touched on or haven't asked you about that you'd like to share?

<The remainder of this interview is redacted as it revolved around specific ministry plans and the roles specific people would play in taking them forward.>

Couple 5

10-15 years of marriage

Age early 70s

Transcript

Interviewer: This is being recorded. Are you willing to be recorded?

Wife: Yes.

Husband: Yes.

Interviewer: Excellent, alright. What did you find best about the training or what did you like the most about the training?

Wife: I liked the conversation with the group. After that, to me it was... Where I was able to process it and help me get my thoughts out.

Husband: There was a lot of great input on our left - I forgot their names. But we were given a lot of great advice, tips and so forth. But yeah, I really like the way they presented it and just learned a lot about communicating with the couple you know. Understanding their feelings and tell them about your problems too, that you had these certain problems and how you overcame them and so forth.

Wife: I think the answer might depend on what type of a learner you are. I like a book that I can highlight and refer back to maybe more so than like, well, the video. But it got us talking as a group. But I do like having more of a book than compared to the little paper manual.

Interviewer: Would you recommend one or two specific changes that you would suggest to make it more effective? Would having a book be one of those?

Wife: Yeah. Well, I might. We did have that. But they call it a workbook or whatever. But I'm more of a reader and a highlighter or writing my notes as I do it. And then for me, watching a video, that goes so fast so you don't have time to write what you want to write or highlight what you know. But you know everybody's a different learner. Some people learn by hearing and I have to read and write.

Husband: I kind of learn by hearing. I thought that the couple were... they were excellent.

Wife: Well, I'd like more the book and the video.

Interviewer: So a book and a video combination.

Wife: Yeah.

Interviewer: There is a book that they wrote that's made to be like the manual for marriage mentors. So perhaps if we had, at the outset, you had gotten that book and you were asked to read that in between sessions. Do you think that would have been something you would have done?

Wife: For me, probably it would have been, yeah.

Husband: I don't know. Yeah, I probably would have read it. Yeah, probably.

Wife: But I could see why, to test this out, you wouldn't want to go in and buy the books right away. You know if you decide to do another group, yeah, maybe then.

Interviewer: Did you feel that the group setting made the training more enjoyable or effective, and if so, why?

Husband: I did. For no particular reason, but the atmosphere setting is really nice.

Wife: I think the group atmosphere is more effective because you got other people's take on it. And like, oh, I didn't think of that or I didn't think of it that way or oh, that's a good idea. And in some cases like, oh I wouldn't do that. People to bounce things off of. That's why I don't like online classes. I like the instructor and the class participation.

Interviewer: Okay, so the in-person aspect was also something you appreciated, and if this had been run as a Zoom thing, you would have been less inclined to participate or enjoy it?

Wife: Yes, definitely. You know, younger people are so used to that type of interaction. Maybe for young people that wouldn't be so bad. I don't think I would like to see that. I didn't like Zoom Bible classes. I did them but I didn't like them. I mean, I just didn't get as involved. It's too easy, like, oh get a coffee or whatever.

Interviewer: Do you feel more confident or comfortable with the role of marriage mentor than you were prior to the training and feel free to add any explanation to that?

Husband: I feel that I am. Something about the class that just... I'm training my brain to, I don't know, I just think feel more comfortable with it.

Wife: I'm more comfortable with it, yeah. And maybe just because I didn't really think about how a mentor would work. You know what I mean? It's like I can't really think of where I mentored someone. I know when I worked, I would train people. Which is maybe somewhat mentoring, but maybe not as much because I was training subject matters, which were kind of black and white versus... Okay, mentoring can be kind of great and white.

Husband: And I would feel very comfortable talking to them, you know about Jesus mostly. You know, how to keep him close to you and your marriage. I just feel comfortable talking about that more than anything else, the love of Christ that they have, he has for them.

Interviewer: When you think of yourselves as potential marriage mentors, do you have a specific vision for what kind of mentoring you would like to? Thinking about those different categories: Preparing, Repairing, and Maximizing, do you feel more apt in one of those areas?

Husband: I personally feel like I'm more apt and would be like a repair situation, because I've been through a lot. You know, two marriages and there's things in my first marriages that I did that I regret. And I can help you through that, okay, what I went through.

Wife: And I don't think I would be good at the repairing. Because we're going to be doing this for another couple. I was thinking more of the first time second marriage like they're two people that maybe through divorce or separation or death that now they've met each other. And so for them it's a beginning.

Husband: It's going to clash at the beginning.

Wife: But it could be different than what they had possibly expected it will be.

Husband: And I fall into that same category also, because those things that... how I treat my wife, that I treated my first wife. And I regret those things. I would think I'd do that over so, we'll work together, we can work together on that.

Interviewer: That gives you a very unique kind of marriage, that's what you're saying.

Husband: Right. Yeah

Wife: And I don't know how many how much, how often you'd have that need, but that's where I feel I would be most comfortable.

Husband: I also agree I would be more comfortable doing that too besides my repair.

Interviewer: I think it's great that you identify that. As you said, how often? But on the flip side, when we do have that, it is a very specific kind of need. So it's really great that you guys are uniquely established for that kind of mentoring.

Husband: Yeah. And we had our... we had our differences when we first got married. We were both set in our own ways. We clashed, as I did in my way - her way. But we came together. Compromise and so forth.

Wife: And even the idea of... It doesn't fit the box, it just turns. That's tough, that's tough on a marriage. So I mean not that we had children that we lived with us, but even having my family and his family and you've got to...

Husband: We're all united. We don't clash at all.

Wife: Right, right. But I could see where for some people that could be an issue depending on their background and how they're coming together.

Interviewer: You shared early on that even though your children are grown and out of the home, as adult children they had their own opinions. Our children have opinions about how we ought to live our lives. The older they get, the more they have those opinions. You had to navigate that together.

Wife: And even melded families. We still have some time we have to meld our... when you have a Christmas and Thanksgiving holidays, you know, trying to get together. And we probably had it easier because you only have one where I had three. But at the same time when you only have one, they've always been the center where I'm used to dividing times with three.

Husband: We clashed right after I proposed to you or whatever, about the grocery list or something.

Wife: No, that was my first marriage, I think.

Husband: No, it's okay, but we clashed because you said you bought this and

Wife: Oh, I told you before that I would...

Husband: It was like a week after that I said, well it wasn't on the list. You know, we went grocery shopping, and the grocery list... well you bought that and it wasn't on the list. And I thought, what am I getting into? That's just one little thing.

Wife: But that would be a good thing to tell people to expect that because that's... you don't live together before and you only know each other when you're dating. So we didn't buy groceries together or whatever. And you'd be surprised because you're set in your ways.

Interviewer: So once again, you feel you've navigated those expectations and you can pass them on to someone else?

Husband: Could be just that little thing. It could be just a little thing. But that's still valuable.

Wife: But you gotta learn the little things so when the big things come up you know how to handle those as well.

Interviewer: Any other thoughts as far as the training went, things that you would suggest or comments you'd like to make about the training process itself?

Husband: I have no qualms myself.

Wife: No, the only thing - and this wasn't your fault - it would have been nice if every session everybody could have been there. You know, it got a little thin in the last one or whatever. I think maybe we missed some discussion that would have come up. That's just my thought.

Husband: That's just the story that happens. It was just hard to manage schedules.

Wife: Yeah, and you can't control that when you're trying to mix so many families, schedules.

Husband: Right, I thought it worked totally great, especially when you can go online and get it Zoomed from there.

Wife: Yeah, but you're missing everything else

Husband: I know you are, but then at least you have that.

Wife: Yeah, so definitely I think if you have people that are committed then maybe you have to change your schedule because, you know, we promised we'll do this.

Husband: It seemed everybody was committed to... and I'm not knocking anybody. We missed a week too.

Wife: And it was hard, I know, trying to fit it in after Lent, but then there's all these things coming up with school and you're trying to get done before summer. So it's a hard time to fix that.

Husband: Yeah, you did a great job. You did best.

Interviewer: This is one of the realities of running any kind of a church site training program is you can't control what everybody will do. But I like your comment about asking for a commitment from people and say if you're going to do this, please commit to these dates.

Wife: And you did you know? And what can you do about it? Depending on how many people you get.

Interviewer: Maybe a smaller group would have been able to commit more people there more often because you have fewer variables.

Wife: But then do you get enough interaction and other people's ideas? Maybe you could do a monetary thing. You get 100 bucks every time you show up.

Interviewer: That would be great. We'd need some donors. You guys know anybody?

Wife: Well, I'm thinking of like, you know, college professors say, you're not going to get the grade if you're not there.

Interviewer: Right, so you're suggesting some incentive to be there.

Wife: Well, you could say, you know, you get up a notch further up toward heaven.

Interviewer: Oh yeah, spiritual pressure. There we go.

<A section redacted as it related to specific ministry programs and people.>

Interviewer: Anything else that you would like to add that we haven't talked about?

Wife: I was thinking about the middle one – enrichment? – I think you have that with the marriage retreat and maybe sometime have breakout sessions with mentors, mentors that are willing to go up and answer any questions that anyone would want to ask.

Interviewer: You're suggesting we build the presence of mentors into our retreat or other marriage enrichment processes?

Wife: Yeah, because who knows, maybe you'd get some that are need repair. That last one that would go to a marriage enrichment class or not a marriage, I mean. Yeah. Marriage retreat.

Interviewer: Well, thank you very much for taking the time to do a little debrief and share your thoughts and I really appreciate it. I appreciate your participation in the program.

Couple 6

25+ years marriage

Age early 60s

Transcript

Interviewer: We'll be recording this. Are you willing to have your answers be recorded?

Husband: Yes.

Wife: Yes.

Interviewer: So you guys went through the training, you were able to be there for most of the sessions in person. You had to do a few on your own. Were you able to complete those online?

Husband: We did the last three on our own.

Interviewer: And that all worked out?

Husband: It worked out.

Interviewer: When you think about the training overall, whether the stuff you did on your own or in the group, how did you feel about the training? What were the things you found positive, enjoyable or helpful?

Husband: You go first.

Wife: I mean, the videos were nice and it was nice to be around other people, but I couldn't relate to the people in the video. I thought they made it seem too easy. Like, I felt, I guess to me they're Pollyanna, you know? Everything was easy and oh, you're our new best friend.

Husband: I think from my standpoint, the questions asked, the approach that was taken with these... you know the steps: getting to know them, the greetings, creating the bond, creating the alliance. Then the questions - I think it was a good sequence. But again, to my wife's point, you

don't know how much... Even some of the people they talked about, were there other marriage mentors? There was no... In my head, you know you can go through the steps, but when you get into a real life situation, you're not sure on what the sequencing of the steps or the timing would be. And that, for lack of a better word, creates a little anxiety. You know, until you gain confidence in that, or going through it. It's one thing to read it in the book. It's another thing to see it on the big screen, so to speak.

Interviewer: What I'm hearing from both of you is the negative side of it, that it seemed a bit idealistic, and then on the other hand, maybe the structure wasn't clear. Is that what you're talking about?

Husband: Somewhat, yeah, it was in doing it (the training), in putting it together, it was all about the good things. I'm a pessimist. So I have a tendency to learn from things that don't go so well or things to look out for. It's like, you know, some situations, you're not going to solve for all of them. If something really bad happens and you're able to be at least a little bit prepared as opposed to all... the Pollyanna.

Interviewer: So you're saying it would have been helpful to have some introduction of what do you do when things don't go well?

Wife: I just think the reality of marriage is messier than they made it seem, you know? I mean, yeah, everybody's happy if it's your beginning entry level. But if you really hit, you know, people that truly have some issues, it's not going to be that easy.

Husband: But overall, like I said, I thought it was good material for, creating the basis for what needed to be done or how you would approach it. And then we talked in a couple of sessions just about you know, the different people, the different life seasons, what they encountered. Like the second marriage, the one couple had, and they're elderly, older than we are.

Wife: It's not one box fits all, you know, totally different.

Husband: Mixed families. All of those type of dynamics. Everybody was young, only one that would look younger than we were or not as young as we were. But I thought that was good.

Interviewer: When it came to the group setting versus the ones that you did on your own, did you find one or the other to be more beneficial?

Wife: I liked hearing what other people had to say and think. It made you think. You know, I think some other people were in the same boat too, like, what do we do if? I just think relationships are so much more messier now and you could really find yourself in a situation if you have someone with some really serious issues. A little more than I bargained for going.

Husband: I found the group setting to be more beneficial from the standpoint that it gives you, in a couple of the larger sessions, you know, eight or nine different perspectives on how to look at it. To me that you know, you said you're thinking about it this way and somebody comes in it from, you know, 45 degrees the other way and you never thought about it that way.

Husband: But like, that's what I'm saying is, even as we talked about in the one session about opportunities, you know, keeping that group together is peer group-slash-learning from each other or, if nothing else, here's what we're encountering. What do you? What do you guys think? I mean, if I'm saying we would attack it from the east and every goes well. You're starting from the wrong spot. You should be coming in from the West and get to the same place. But I found the group to be more... Other than her and I talking about how we would do it or how we should have done it or the mistakes we made. Hindsight being 2020, we got a mulligan or a redo.

Interviewer: So, if I'm hearing you right, you're saying the different perspectives in the room was helpful to you?

Husband: For me it was. Definitely.

Interviewer: You mentioned before that you found the videos were maybe a little too idealistic, that it would have been nice to have some ideas of what to do when things go wrong. If there were other things, maybe one or two other specific things that you would suggest we change to make it better, what would those be?

Wife: In the way it was done? Or the video?

Interviewer: In the way that we are running it here, because we can only do so much with the videos.

Wife: I don't know that there's a real easy answer to that.

Husband: I guess the only thing for me... again, it goes back to understanding in one regard, it's difficult to get a group together, number one, and ask for a longer commitment. My feeling is it would be more beneficial for the group if there was a little bit more of a commitment. You know, we're trying to scrunch it all in into a six or eight week period, rather than let's maybe spread it out? I'm not saying go 12 or 16 weeks, but something a little bit longer, so you're able to delve into different areas. And then maybe in those sessions have like a little play acting or role play.

Wife: Oh no, not role-playing, no. But I think a lot of it is based on topics different times, different seasons. I think I wrote in my response back on your questionnaire, it's like, there's a lot of discernment in pre-marriage, before you're even in the pre-marriage. Do I want to get married? But it's singles. I think there's a lot of pre-marriage. Then there's a lot of OK, we're merging as one. Now we have kids. Sickness and health. Then there's the blended families out there, a whole group of their own. I mean the topics just ramp up because of what season you're in. And then there's the ready... I'm ready to kill you group, you know, ready to throw in the towel. And so it just depends on where you're at and how you address it or where you go.

Husband: And I think from my background coming from the Catholicism Catholic Church, born and raised, until I converted here, but up until that point, priests, I mean, they're never married. They don't go through some of that things with... I mean they've got the event, you know, Lord's intervention and everything and what they do, but just different people and their experiences. But the one critique, or positive criticism or feedback would be, in the interest of not trying to get it all done so everybody doesn't bail out, would be maybe to stretch it a little bit longer, but go a little bit deeper. Maybe if we went for two hours, you know, maybe do the same amount for longer.

Wife: If you could really, I mean I found with doing TD,¹⁸ like the book club things where you have the book to read and think about and ponder and stuff. I mean, I don't know how you relate that to a marriage topic or marriage mentoring, but it kind of gives you a direction to ponder on. Instead of all over, because everybody's experience is different, too, and everybody who's modeling experience was different. Which is nice to know up front, but then after a while you're kind of all over.

Interviewer: Having gone through the training, did you find that your comfort level or confidence level with the idea of being marriage mentors changed at all, either increased or decreased?

Wife: I don't know. I don't know how I feel about that. I don't know. I don't think it changed. I just don't know. I still think we need a mentor.

¹⁸ This is a reference to a program called Transformational Discipleship, an 18-month process that combines large group weekend retreats, small group book discussion groups, and one-to-one coaching.

Husband: I think... coming in I think it didn't change the confidence level and being able to do it, but it created... gave me some tools to do it. But in order to have it work, there has to be two and again from coming into it...

Wife: It depends on what the commitment is. The thing is the commitment level, you know.

Husband: Yeah. And then that's where we talked about a little bit in a couple of the sessions is what's the duration. Is this a lifelong thing? And hopefully it turns into a friendship, but if it doesn't, you know, what's the... Is this a six week thing? Four? Again, being planners, it's the definition of when it starts and ends. It's a little bit... it would be kind of I don't say concern but uncertainty.

Wife: That's kind of where we get into trouble, where we have good intentions and then all the... Oh, we're going up north.

Husband: We have to serve the coffee...

Wife: Yeah, he's signed up to serve the coffee already, so then we don't go north. Or we go north and it's a long ride, so...

Interviewer: One of the things that I'm hearing from you guys is, what is the commitment level after the training? You've done the training, what happens next and how much time do I spend with the couple and what does that look like?

Husband: And I still hold that, like I said, have the training around more, more of that definition, but also on the backside, there's always the... where we step back and we have meeting, maybe once a month, once a quarter. That people are able to, you know, not... Not being gossips, protecting that attorney-client privilege or whatever the heck you want to call it. But it's more about, This is what I encountered, how would you have done it differently?

Wife: Yeah, I guess don't expect to understand what the couples want. I see that there are some just really good Christian couples that just want to know, have some helpful hints. But then I've worked in the real world within healthcare and stuff. And people are messy and all of a suddenly you really, you know, either you get feast or famine. You get people who are just, nice, easy going and then you get people who really want help or need help. And it can be overwhelming a little bit sometimes so you don't know what you're going to get.

Husband: But as you had said, I think that would be, from our standpoint, the class was to help you to see if this works and if we could learn ourselves from the majority. But as we go through it... yeah, we've been through a few next steps. You know, classes, not just yours.

Interviewer: When you think about the dimensions in this particular training: the Preparing, Repairing, and Maximizing. If you were to envision yourselves as mentors, do you feel yourselves leaning towards one of those specific areas over the others?

Husband: I would probably, for me, I would say either the preparing or maximizing. Not the repairing. I don't have the personality to be able to just listen.

Interviewer: Overall, is there anything else that I haven't asked about that you would like to share about the training or advice you would give for the future?

Wife: Like I said, my big one was that I think it's at different stages, different topics. I think there's a lot of parenting issues that can bring in marriage concerns, because you're running your kids or your kids are too busy. I mean, it's not just how you, you know, make slow cooker meals to get someplace. It's differences in discipline. Not just, you know, making a date night, but how do you fight about marriage and money or kids and money. And so parenting. I learned over the years that parenting topics can also determine your relationship because you can't... you have to be united front, and if you're not and you have differences that's going to cause issues too. So to me it's just different stages, different phases. What you're going through, you just can't say, oh,

it's marriage all in one. It really kind of has to be... how that all that affects the marriage, I mean, if we had a kid that had drug or alcohol... that would probably be a whole other gamut dealing with... and also in their marriage and stuff. Some people don't... I just think there's just so many different things. If you just try to pocket it as one, it's not that easy.

Husband: And I think, like I said, it's like directions. You know, somebody can give you directions and they're the right directions. They're just from the wrong starting point. Those expectations and clarity, but to my wife's point, it's maybe rather than, it's like skipping over the waves. You know, there's going to be some times where you got to get down a little bit then you...

Wife: It's gonna be peaks and valleys.

Husband: Yeah, there's going to be peaks and valleys, but it's understanding what those valleys look like. And there's going to be understanding what those peaks look like just so everybody's aware of... again, it's so dynamic. But I think the sessions gave you the overview, but maybe fleshing out a little bit some of those.

Wife: I mean, like, we couldn't help someone who was in a blended family. Because that's a totally different animal and we don't have that experience. We've had fidelity, I mean, so some of it's by topic too, because you just... The dynamics and the feelings of certain stuff like... that major illness.

Husband: I mean, especially now with all the Wild... I mean, the Wild West and the whole.... Gosh, our kids are old enough and I think identified on what they are, but...

Wife: Oh yeah, today all the kids, it's different. How do you handle all that? And people can... all that affects your marriage in the end so...

Husband: Again, at the end, at the end of the day, it's like you had mentioned, you know, the triangle. It's the two people and God. And as long as you're growing toward God... But still there's always that grounding that you need to be able to think that way.

Wife: And then forgive them seven times seven times seventy. Having to learn to do that and... but it doesn't mean to forget. And I think the other big thing we learned is love is not, love is not a feeling. It's a choice. So a lot of people misunderstand it as a feeling.

Husband: So I mean, all of those things. You know, like you said, I thought it was, it was good. It's everything else too though.

Interviewer: That's all the questions I have for you. Your feedback is very helpful.

Couple 7

10-15 years married

Age late 30s

Transcript

Interviewer: For the record, you are okay with this being recorded?

Husband: Yes.

Wife: Yes.

Interviewer: You were able to participate in some group sessions and some on your own. Were you able to do all of the training sessions one way or another?

Husband: Yes.

Wife: Yep.

Interviewer: What did you like best or find most helpful about the training overall?

Husband: I think just brainstorming different ideas on how to be more active listener. How to ask more appropriate questions that are maybe inviting rather than confrontational.

Wife: I liked that the video had people who had done it and could give their little tidbits and expertise instead of just kind of throwing information. But it was nice to hear from people who had walked in those shoes and kind of give more real world little tips. And I liked the discussion too because then we could clarify or it was nice to see different points of view, because if you're watching it on your own, you're thinking of your side of things. But it was nice in the discussion to see multiple sides or views depending on whatever the topic is. Yeah. For us, I think the first couple of sessions were a little bit slower, which I understood the reason for it was more introductory. We liked the sessions more when it got into the nuts and bolts of like the actual asking the questions. I guess that's what we were looking for, is that more applicable tips.

Interviewer: Okay. Anything else?

Wife: There were some handout sheets that I think we will go back to as we were with the journal. Like I'm glad that there was something here that if you're like, Oh, yeah, what was this about, do you remember? Some of these were great.

Husband: I liked how we each had to have kind of answered certain questions or write down four things and then compare with us, because I think the more we better we can understand our marriage, the better we can help others. So I think that was good.

Wife: But there are some things in here that I wouldn't have thought of on my own if it wasn't there. I appreciate...

Interviewer: So the journal was something you found helpful?

Husband: The journaling was good, I think. Yeah, this was... Even though we were joking that they were talking about listening to their tapes, the video...

Wife: We were laughing at how dated it was. Whatever the last one was... "And then we showed them our tapes..." We're like... man...

Husband: But I think the journaling and the question is very helpful.

Interviewer: So, that's one piece of feedback you'd say we should pass on to the creators of the training, to update the videos a little more regularly?

Wife: Yes. Yes. Just with some of the examples you're like, I mean you could tell off their clothing and such too. But it was more like... part of it too is just how the world has changed and making sure that you're still mentoring in what's relevant. Like God's word, doesn't change, but different conflicts or different problems that couples are going to face might be different than what they were in the early 90s. Like technology, for instance, could be a huge one that couples could face, and if they're watching things on tape, I don't know how much that was... I mean that could just be a whole different piece of it cuz, I feel like a lot of technology and social media and how that can hinder a marriage.

Husband: It's like a whole other, yeah that's a whole different beast, but just, yeah, more updated might be good.

Interviewer: How did you feel about the group setting? When you participated in the group versus doing it at home, which did you find you preferred more?

Husband: I like the two sessions we did at home. I mean, I liked the group probably more, but I also felt the little discussions we had at home were nice, that you probably wouldn't have in the group. But I felt like the size of that group was appropriate. I wouldn't have wanted it bigger.

Wife: Yeah, we would have, I think, preferred to have the group all the way through. We just had a conflict on Mother's Day and my husband had his tonsils out so we had a conflict that weekend too. So I think we preferred the discussion, but we still had a good discussion, just the two of us.

But I think part of that was also the content was meatier in the sessions we did at home cuz it was towards the end. Like had it been the introductory sessions at home, I think we would have been kind of like, OK, get to the rest of it. So I think we were able to have a better discussion because of the sessions that it was.

Interviewer: Did you find that it was easier to be more open in discussion at home or in the group setting?

Husband: I personally thought that group because other people are sparking discussion. Sharing their thoughts that I maybe wouldn't have thought of at home.

Wife: Every time we left the group, we had a discussion about it on the way home. Like if there were things that we wouldn't necessarily say in front of people we don't know very well. So it's not like we left and then it was like, what are you doing today. We definitely carried the conversation on to have that private between us.

Husband: You just get more insight from everybody's experiences, so I think I think the age ranges and the demographic differences were nice in the group.

Wife: That adds to it.

Interviewer: What are one or two specific changes you would recommend to make the group setting more effective or more enjoyable?

Wife: For me it might have been, I don't know... Because the first one was very introductory, but even if that would have been more of just like, get to know you without the videos. Just because I feel like in order to break down some walls, to have a discussion, you do need to establish a level of, Hi, what's your name? And you did that, but I don't know if it would have been...

Husband: It's just a comfort level, I think by, definitely by the third session, you know the wheels are rolling, more people were talking.

Wife: Right you were engaged. I don't know, cuz, yeah, the first session was introductory, but just something to help. And everyone's different. I'm an extrovert, so I could talk to the wall. So, like a group setting doesn't faze me. But I also understand for some people that's very intimidating, like, I don't know you and I don't want to talk if I don't know you, especially about me so. The tricky part too, and obviously nothing can be helped, is that when people would come in and out like, especially if they missed the first one. I felt bad because they missed that like, yeah, level of, What's your story? Like that. And it wasn't too many people thankfully, but that was the only thing, and there's nothing you can really do about it with people's busy schedules.

Husband: Right. I feel like some of the introductory work could maybe a bit have been done on your own and then come together. Maybe by the third session I don't know.

Wife: Well, I don't know. I think it's important to hear from every person. Otherwise, yeah, the first couple of videos were very...

Husband: The videos, right, that's what I was referencing.

Wife: Not like giving a ton of tools, I guess if that makes sense. But I think it was important for the group to move together.

Husband: Yeah, yeah. It was just the content of the journaling initially, I think, that set the groundwork for getting together as a group.

Wife: I felt it was an appropriate amount of sessions, like it wasn't too long or too short? And time wise too. I don't think if you do it too long then it's kind of like, OK, like we're done. We're spent.

Husband: Yeah, it went by fast. The sessions went by fast, having even slightly longer would have been fine with me. I didn't think it was too long.

Interviewer: Having done the training, do you feel more confident or comfortable with the role of marriage mentor than you did beforehand?

Husband: I do. Yeah.

Wife: I think they just did a good job of laying out like what's expected of you. And then also like some things. Like, share your story but be cautious with what you share or these are the right way to ask questions. I feel like they encompassed all the layers that mentoring would cover. The only thing I would still be looking for, and I think I mentioned it at one of the groups, is more of, like, biblically. Just because obviously we're not in the public ministry. But like, if someone's struggling with something, what are the best areas to go to for this struggle or for this struggle or for this struggle? From the God's word side of it.

Husband: Sure, highlighting a few topics and then what are some verses you can reference?

Wife: And I can look up passages, but I also don't always know the context. Or you know how sometimes even it's preached in church. Like don't just put that one verse out and like, apply it however you feel like. I mean I feel like there's been quite a few sermons where one of our pastors has talked about that. And so I don't wanna do that either. Where like, I found this verse it fits, and it's like, totally not at all. I just remember, even when I did confirmation these were your very important chapters or passages. Obviously the ultimate goal is that we use God's word to do the mentoring, that it's not just hey, we have this in our marriage, but like ultimately, you know, God's the third partner. So getting that is always the forefront, and so I guess that's one thing we were wanting or looking for.

Interviewer: Do you feel comfortable serving as a marriage mentor couple in the future and if so, thinking about those three dimensions: Preparing, Repairing, and Maximizing. those 3 dimensions. Is there one that seems like a good fit for you?

Husband: I had a 20, 40, 40 mix, so the maximizing and repair 40,40. And then the other one was 20.

Wife: Preparing. Yeah, and part of it was, I guess we view... we feel like our strength would be meeting with couples and like establishing that relationship. And I know you mentioned like in the preparing like coming to the seminars. With our schedule, with our kids, I feel like those Saturdays, in all honesty will be hard. And it's just the season of life we're in. And I can't say that for sure because obviously I don't know. But our kids are very much in the middle school and grade school activities. And that's just hard for us to, like, say absolutely we can make those because we don't know and we don't want to over extend ourselves that way. However, like to meet with a couple when we can find a time, then we're all on board. It's just we don't know that we can commit to that piece of it with the phase of life we're in. But otherwise, like any other sort of thing, if we could make one, we definitely would. But more of like, OK, here's our schedule. Here's your schedule. Let's figure out a time. Yeah, I feel like that's going to work best.

Interviewer: In general, anything that I haven't already asked about, any additional thoughts or comments about the training that you'd like to share or something that we haven't touched on yet?

Wife: I think the only thing moving forward, and I think I brought this up already, is if like another group goes through the training, it would be nice if there's a plan established. Here's the training, now here's where we can plug you in, if that makes sense. Then that next step is ready. And obviously I know that all has to be worked out. I know we're the Guinea pigs and all of that, but I guess that would be something. I'm such a planner that it makes sense before another group goes through that. And then Step 2 is done. To be like OK, you guys are great, here's where we

can plug you in. Where do you want to be in this scheme? Cuz our church is so big that it would be obviously nice to continue to train people and get more couples involved.

Husband: Well, and for us too, you know. Not that we sit dormant for so long and you know if there are people that you could utilize this. Now you know like what would be steps to try that maybe?

Wife: For sure.

Husband: And maybe that's not necessarily part of this

Wife: That almost it would be like a following session. OK, then here's the session, where can we get you plugged in? In our congregation or whatever?

Interviewer: Thank you so much for your participation and your feedback.

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